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Wild life: the world's best camping spots

Flannel panel

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Cover photograph:
Ralf Gantzhorn, Vaude Visions photo
contest, www.vaudevisions.com



Extreme camping



Where's the best place you've ever camped? Mine is beneath the Maclaren Glacier in Alaska. We got there by tin boat up a river. After we'd pitched the tents we stomped through bushes and streams towards the glacier, meeting a prancing caribou on the way. That evening we toasted marshmallows as the sun set. There were just four of us and, apart from the odd aeroplane, there was no evidence of any other human being in sight. I will always remember the feeling of being alone in the wilderness with my friends... (And the next evening we went to a motel for a hot shower.) There's more about amazing camping on page 72.

Elsewhere this edition we've got a classic trek, the Tour du Mont Blanc, around Western Europe's spectacular highest peak. Further afield we're mountain biking in Laos and canoeing in Canada. And we meet some inspirational characters too – TV presenter Steve Backshall reveals how you can get his dream job, and mountain guide Kenton Cool tells us why Everest is a wicked mistress. Happy camping.

Rosie

Camp it up

This issue we're talking camping, so we asked our contributors: where's the best place you've ever camped? Here's what they said – Tweet yours to @rosieATmag and @ATmagOnline



Steve Livingston

"Camping above the beach on the Isle of Harris. I'll never forget the track of pale light leading across the sea to the half moon above the horizon."

Steve cycles coast to coast on the Way of the Roses, page 41.



Abigail Butcher

"It was more glamping, at Lake Pangarh in Rajasthan, India. We rode there on Mawari horses. Watching the sun rise over the lake is a moment I will never forget."

Read Abigail's feature on cycling in sweltering Cuba, page 88.



Fran McElhone

"In Whistler, Canada, we hiked through woods to the far end of Cheakamus Lake. Pitching in the shadow of the mountains, we caught rainbow trout for breakfast."

Canada expert Fran is canoeing in Nova Scotia, page 76.



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Life in Cuba takes place out on the street, which is why it's best explored by bike (with a mojito), says Abigail Butcher. Go before everything changes

Get out. Stay out.

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Pack test, p98

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PHOTO COMPETITION

With the motto 'life is an adventure,' outdoor equipment and clothing company Vaude is hosting the Visions Photo Contest, searching for amateur and professional images that awaken the viewer's spirit of adventure. Entries are now in, and the winner will be decided via both an online vote and a panel of expert.

Announced in September, the reward for the best shot is €5,000; see more at www.vaudevisions.com.



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EXTREME ADVENTURE RACE

The Red Bull X-Alps Race, pictured here, is claimed to be the world's toughest adventure race. Athletes start in Salzburg, Austria, and make their way to Monaco, on foot or by paraglider, via 10 checkpoints. The hardy participants cover about 1,000km, with hundreds of metres of ascent along the way. It's so tough that this year only 32 athletes took part, and a record 19 of them made it to the end. The event was won by Swiss athlete Chrigel Maurer, who took eight days, four hours and 37 minutes to finish – wow.

GO NOW



ADVENTURE CAMERA

This is a picture of abseiling over the mighty Kaiteur Falls in Guyana. Once you've got your breath back, try asking this: who took the photo and how the hell did they manage it? The answer is Keith Partridge, one of the world's most experienced adventure photographers and film-makers. His new book, *The Adventure Game*, is out now, and it's full of more mind-blowing photography and wonderful tales of adventure, often with well-known characters from the outdoor and climbing world.

It costs £24.95; visit www.adventurecamera.co.uk.

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Guatemala

Heart of the Mayan World



Steve Backshall

Steve Backshall is an adventurer and TV presenter who has explored undiscovered cave systems, made first ascents of vast jungle mountains and met some of the world's most majestic and terrifying creatures. We find out more...



You seem to have done everything and been everywhere – have you got the best job in the whole world?

Yes – I think so! For someone who has my passion in life, I can't imagine anything better. I've managed to make a life out of the things I love doing.

What's your most recent expedition?

I've just got back from a big mountaineering trip in Venezuela, where we did a first ascent. There are still parts of the world that remain unexplored, and still challenges that haven't been done, particularly in mountaineering and caving.

To get your job as an adventure presenter you simply set off into the jungle with a video camera...?

Exactly. I was working as a writer for Rough Guides and I had an idea for a programme, so I went into the jungle and filmed myself catching snakes, spiders and scorpions. Admittedly the film was pretty rotten but my boss at National Geographic clearly saw potential and took me on as their Adventurer in Residence. And I've been doing it ever since.

You're best known as a kids' TV presenter – what do you like about



doing children's telly?

It's a lot of fun – you can have slightly more fun being a wildlife presenter when you're doing it for a younger audience than when you're doing it for adults. But also I think it's really important. Most adults have already decided how they feel about the world, and what their enthusiasms are, whereas kids are open to suggestions. Kids can watch programmes like these and think, 'Yes, great, animals – that's what I'd like to do with my life.' I get hundreds and hundreds of letters every month from children saying that they want to be a zoologist or similar because



Climbing high: adventurer and presenter Steve Backshall

'A child with an obsession can be invincible – you get an army of eight-year-olds who have decided that they want to change the world and they will'

they've seen the programmes. It feels like a way of making a difference.

Is it true that kids nowadays just want to play computer games?

It is certainly a truth, but it's not the whole story. I'm lucky that I get to see the kids that aren't that way; the ones that have a passion for the outdoors and for animals. That sparkle in their eye, that enthusiasm, is deeply, deeply infectious. A child with an obsession can be invincible – you get an army of eight-year-olds who have decided that they want to change the world and they will. And that's very uplifting.

You present a programme called *Deadly 60* – what's the deadliest creature you've met?

The deadliest creature to us is the mosquito, by a million miles. All of the world's species of sharks kill fewer than 10 people a year in the whole world, whereas mosquitoes might kill 1.5million. The danger of wild animals to us as human beings is massively overstated, and a big part of *Deadly* was breaking down the message about how much we have to fear from bears and sharks and crocodiles and big cats – which is nothing at all in comparison to some parasites, which are quite ➤



Scary snake? Not as harmful as the mosquito - or the human, says Steve

dangerous, and fellow human beings, which are even more dangerous.

You've got a new book coming out - tell us more?

It's been in the making for a while now. It's about how I got into mountaineering, and some of my biggest mountaineering expeditions, along with a sense of why I think people as a whole are drawn to the mountains.

And it covers a big climbing fall?

Yes. I was in the Wye Valley, just after getting back from a big expedition. I was there with a friend, we were knocking off various routes and I took on a climb too soon after it had rained. I came off and hit the ground from about 10 metres up, breaking my back in two places and putting my heel bone through the underneath of my foot - it

destroyed my left foot completely. Six years and 12 operations later, I now have a fused left ankle, so I'll never be back to 100% fitness, but I've pretty much got my life back.

So it didn't put you off climbing?

No. I love climbing so much that it's part of my life. I knew I had to get back on it as soon as I possibly could, to make sure that I beat as many of the demons as possible. I'll never be back to the level I was at before, I will never recover completely in terms of my psyche, my morale about climbing, but I can still go out and do big things in the hills.

Was it frustrating being injured?

Incredibly frustrating. But there were always people who were worse off than me and it helped to know that I couldn't get down, I couldn't feel sorry

'There are still parts of the world that remain unexplored, still challenges that haven't been done'

for myself, because so many people were suffering from things a billion times worse than what I was going through.

What advice have you got for anyone who wants to become an adventure TV presenter?

I would say start small. Start with the achievable. Start in your own back garden, discovering the birds, the bird songs, the invertebrates, things that you might not be familiar with, things that you might not have seen before. It doesn't have to be big and dangerous and epic. Start by learning your craft on a small scale. And go for it. You have to know from the start that this is not just going to be a holiday; it will involve a phenomenal amount of work, it will involve you having to sacrifice everything else in your life. But if you succeed it will lead to an extraordinarily adventurous and fulfilled life.

Do you do personal expeditions as well as TV ones?

Yes. A TV expedition is totally different to a normal one. You are on call every single second of the day, you don't get the chance to enjoy things as much. So I have a hard and fast rule that every year I will do an expedition that has nothing to do with television, that is purely for my own sanity. It's really important to me.

What have you got coming up next, personally and professionally?

I'm doing a BBC series called *Big Blue Live*, spotting whales in California, and I have a speaking tour coming up in the autumn. Personally I'm in the Alps for 10 days of mountaineering - there are a few peaks I'm hoping to do, so we'll just see what the time and weather allows. **AT**

Steve Backshall is on tour across the UK in October and November. His new book *Mountain: A Life on the Rocks* is out on 8 October. Check out www.stevebackshall.com.



Gran Canaria is the perfect resort for this kind of traveller, because, apart from all its new infrastructures, its landscape, climate, geography and distinct volcanic terrain, make it simply the perfect sports centre. Visitors can go walking, go mountain running, swim, sail, surf, go cycling, and in all its specialities, climbing and diving, football, synchronized swimming, both indoor and beach volleyball, golf, and so on...

All this, together with the wide choice of hotels and alternative accommodation, restaurants, medical services and relaxation centres, has turned Gran Canaria into the High Performance Training Centre that any team, club or individual sportsperson could ever wish for, to be able to prepare fully for the competitive season ahead.

Amateur sports enthusiasts will also find in the hills, to the North or down at the ever popular South, infrastructures and natural settings right on their doorstep the whole year round; eternal Spring, nearly 50% of its territory being a Biosphere Reserve, together with the friendly, open and helpful islanders, will make your holiday at this training camp in Gran Canaria an experience to linger long in the memory.



For further information visit www.grancanaria.com

READERS EXPOSED

NAME: Neil Taylor
AGE: 41
OCCUPATION: Driver



Lifelong ambition?

To travel...

Person you would most like to meet, and the question you would ask them?

I would like to meet the TV presenter/traveller Alan Whicker. I would ask him a question and then just sit back and listen to all his wonderful travel tales from a life exploring the world.

Who's your ideal travel partner and why?

I don't really have one but if I did it would be Peter Kay or Lee Evans to keep me laughing along the way.

Previous outdoor history?

When I first started travelling I did four camping trips in the USA and absolutely loved them. I've been there over 50 times now so I think those trips started my obsession.

Most dangerous moment?

Take your pick from twice having a knife pulled on me in South Africa, stopping hotel room intruders in Ankara or being in Pakistan on 9/11.

Most memorable moment?

Arriving into Kathmandu after four months of travelling overland from the UK. A trip I'll never forget.

What do you miss most when you are on trail?

That's got to be an ice-cold beer.

Future travel plans?

To finish going away somewhere every weekend for five straight months – I'm two months into it. Then I'm going over to the States, and then it's planning a big trip for January 2016 – the list only gets longer.

Favourite crap joke?

Velcro... what a rip off.

Ever wondered what sort of awesome people read the world's best outdoor travel magazine?

NAME: Michael Pettifer
AGE: 27
OCCUPATION: Journalism student

Lifelong ambition?

To be a full-time novelist or a TV writer. Unfortunately, so many other people have the same dream.

Person you would most like to meet, and the question you would like to ask them?

Bill Bryson. As I was growing up, he was the one who fuelled the flame for both travelling and writing. I'd ask him if he ever laughs aloud when he's writing about his own experiences.

Who's your ideal travel partner and why?

My partner Charlotte. She has a really good sense of adventure, but she is also sensible enough to stop me when I'm about to do something stupid or beyond my ability.

Previous outdoor history?

In 2014, my dad and I cycled from Land's End to John O'Groats, covering a distance of 1,160 miles – around 100 miles further than we'd planned due to our horrendous map reading skills. I've also done a lot of hiking in Australia and South East Asia.

Most dangerous moment?

Walking into a golden orb spider that had spun its web across a track in the Chiang Mai jungle. This probably isn't actually all



that dangerous, but in my mind it was life-threatening.

Most memorable moment?

Cage diving with great white sharks off the coast of Port Lincoln, South Australia. For some reason, I had difficulty keeping my limbs from floating out of the cage's viewing window. The sharks didn't know what to make of it – they'd never had such an easy target.

What do you miss most when you are on trail?

Fish and chips!

Future travel plans?

I'm planning to walk coast to coast, from Robin Hood's Bay to St Bees. After that, I'd like to try the Camino de Santiago in Spain. Wherever I go, I'd like to get there on my own two feet.

Favourite crap joke?

What sound does a nut make when it sneezes? Cashew! 

JOIN THE FUN!

Want to be a reader exposed? (who doesn't?). Make yourself known to Rosie (rosie@atmagazine.co.uk). Everyone we feature gets a year's free subscription to Adventure Travel – what a treat!





Can't camp without

5 items you should always take camping

Aside from the obvious (tent, rucksack, sleeping bag and roll mat) what else should you always take camping with you? We asked **Ellis Brigham Mountain Sports** camping experts for some of the more unusual yet essential items that they can't camp without.

Light My Fire FireSteel Scout £10.99

On wet and windy days, getting your stove started can be tricky; lighters are unreliable, damp matches don't work... what you need is a FireSteel! Thanks to Light My Fire, the 3000°C spark makes fire building easy in any weather, at any altitude.

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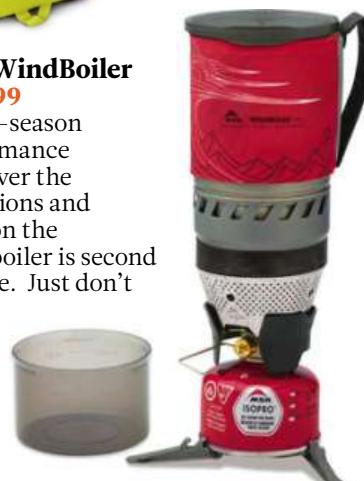


Osprey Ultralight DrySack 6L £9.99

Keep your gear dry and protected, and when the weather improves fill it with air and use as a makeshift pillow instead!

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www.lowealpine.com

We're delighted that Lowe Alpine has decided to name a bag after us (well, that's our story). The AT Wheelie 90 is seriously tough. It may have wheels but that doesn't mean it's for sissies - these are rugged, oversized wheels designed for rough terrain. The retractable handle for pulling the bag around is wide, for extra strength and control, and both the grab handles (side and top) are metal. There's an external zip-up pocket on the top, and a zip-up mesh sleeve on the inside to help organise gear. I love the super smart looks, and it also comes in an off-black colour with an orange trim, as well as the blue pictured. The only downside is that the wide handle doesn't stay securely in place when in use. **RF**

**Tough
BAG**



CASSTROM NO.10 SWEDISH FOREST KNI £94.95

www.casstrom.co.uk

There's something about a good knife that makes it more attractive than a cutting instrument ought to be, and that's certainly the case with the No.10 Swedish Forest Knife. With a 12cm oak handle and a 10cm blade of O2 high carbon tool steel, the No.10 is ideal for bushcraft, survival and general outdoor use.

The knife is available with either a Scandinavian grind or a Full Flat grind (the grind is the way the knife is sharpened), depending on how you plan to use it. The Scandinavian grind makes the blade exceptionally tough, resilient to heavy tasks and is ideal for bushcraft, while a Full Flat grind makes the knife more effective at cutting softer materials, like food preparation and use in day to day chores.

The beautifully crafted knife comes with an

**Sexy
KNIFE**



equally well made leather sheath, and a flint to get a fire going or ignite a camping stove. What a nice little package, and the knife will last you a lifetime (as long as you look after it) - not a bad deal at just under 100 quid. **BD**

GO PRO HERO

£94

www.camerajungle.co.uk

This was my first foray into the world of Go Pros, so starting with the entry level Hero seemed wise. It's less hi tech than the company's new Hero4 model, but with a much friendlier price, it will be more appealing to many. And with instruction from some young people, I even got the hang of it.

The Hero comes in a robust case, for protection against drops, dust and even up to 40m of water. You can attach it to all sorts of devices, such as a helmet, a selfie stick (like the 3 Way POV Pole, £52.99) or handlebars - I do a lot of cycle touring and have needed a camera on my bike for ages. It takes great video, and pictures at various frames per second, depending on what quality you want the photos.

Downsides are that there's no wifi or bluetooth, and no screen to review footage. I also found the battery drained when it wasn't in use. But if you want a GoPro without ruining the bank balance, this is the one. **RF**

KEEN UEEK SANDALS

£89.99

www.keenfootwear.com

Uneek by name, unique by nature. These 'sandals' are different to anything we've had on our feet before. Essentially made from two pieces of cord and a sole unit, the Uneek is designed to mould to the



shape of the foot for the perfect fit, offering comfort even when they're worn for a long time, and plenty of ventilation in warm temperatures. While the shoes don't offer much in terms of protection or stability, they're ideal for general travel in warmer countries, wearing on the beach, or for something comfy on a long flight.

Appearance-wise the Uneek is controversial: a bit of a Marmite product. They're expensive, but their quirkiness and unique looks and feel might win you over. **BD**

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New kit

Adventure Travel has been catching up with the top outdoor gear manufacturers to get a sneak preview of their big stories for next year. Here are some of our favourites...

BERGHAUS

HYDROSHELL HYBRID JACKET

£200

Introduced this year, Hydroshell has been Berghaus's most successful new fabric launch ever and we can see why – we love the Light Trek Hydroshell Jacket we've had on long-term test and, designed to sit between entry-level products and top-of-the-range Gore-Tex garments, the price is good too. New next season, the men's Hydroshell Hybrid jacket, designed for alpinism and tough hiking, will use two different Hydroshell fabrics to give the best combination of a light weight and durability. It also uses Berghaus's innovative thermal body mapping. Other great news from the brand is that it's introducing the Made Kind symbol, for environmentally friendly products that are either made out of a Bluesign approved fabric; made using the company's Colourkind colouring process; or made using recycled materials.

www.berghaus.com



SHERPA

PREETI JACKET

£75

Preeti means love in Nepalese, and we love this stripy travel hoodie – it's stretchy and comfy, has thumbholes and uses Polygiene technology to inhibit the growth of odour-causing micro-organisms. Now more than ever is a good time to support Sherpa – following April's earthquake in Nepal the company began making tents and blankets in its factory, and its Help Sherpas Help Nepal campaign has raised over US\$150,000 so far.

www.sherpaadventuregear.co.uk



BLACK DIAMOND

TORCH SPOT HEADLAMP

£40

This is a snazzy headtorch. It's waterproof – at a trade show in Germany, Black Diamond had it sitting in a bowl of water all day, but officially it will survive half an hour submerged in a metre of water (not that we recommend trying either at home). It also tells you how much battery life it has left; you give it a quick tap to change between full and dimmed power, and there's a lock mode to stop it accidentally turning on in your bag.

<http://blackdiamondequipment.com>



THERM-A-REST

NEOAIR CAMPER SV

£125

This is one of the most exciting products we saw in a summer of gear shows. The sleeping mat's Speed Valve means it can be blown up in fewer than 10 breaths (we saw it done in about six), as the air blown into the mattress entraps surrounding air, dragging it into the mat along with the original breath. The three-inch thick mattress is also super comfortable, and it uses Therm-a-Rest's ThermaCapture technology for warmth. It weighs 910g, so it won't be one for super lightweight camping, but we're very excited to test it. It'll be available in April 2016.

www.thermarest.com



SALOMON

CROSSAMPHIBIAN SHOE

£95

Salomon says the Crossamphibian shoe is perfect for active people in hot weather and wet environments. We can only dream about the weather, but this is a great shoe for rafting, kayaking or even the new thing of swim-running, with the bottom unit of a running shoe, a wet grip sole and a quick-drying mesh upper. Nice colours too.

www.salomon.com

**SEA TO SUMMIT****SLEEPING MAT****From £85**

Sea to Summit's designers spent four years working on the company's Sleeping Mats and it looks like it was worth the effort. The dots on the mat (or the 'dot welding construction') mean that the distribution of air in the mat always stays even – it won't sag under your body weight. The mats use Sea to Summit's own durable fabric, they come in insulated and non-insulated versions, and they have an anti-bacterial treatment too.

www.seatosummit.com

LOWE ALPINE**AIR ZONE PRO 35:45****£110**

It's all about the back system on this hiking pack – in fact it won an Outdoor Industry Award for it at a prestigious outdoor show in Germany. Lowe Alpine's Air Zone technology is super breathable, and on the new pack the Air Zone mesh has been reduced to maximise air space and breathability. There's also a new wrap-around harness and hip belt to increase stability and comfort.

www.lowalpine.com

**MILLCAN****LES THE COOLER BAG****£95**

We were delighted to meet the team from Lake District-based Millican, and they are serious bag connoisseurs. Out of a host of sustainable and ethical stories, we particularly like that the company uses wool from local Herdwick sheep in products (farmers often have to burn it when they can't find a use for it), such as iPad covers and Les the Cooler Bag, pictured here. The wool keeps the content of the bag cool for six hours; the bag has a waterproof lining and comes in a choice of two colours. And it's called Les.

www.homeofmillican.com



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MEINDL

Antarctica's forgotten expedition

You've heard about Amundsen and Scott – now meet Japan's **Nobu Shirase**

Who was he?

Nobu Shirase was a Japanese explorer who led an unlikely expedition to the Antarctic in 1910-1912.

Early life

The son of a Buddhist priest, Nobu was born in 1861 and as a child was fascinated by stories of polar environments. At 18 he went to a school for Buddhist priests, but left when he realised it wouldn't help him become an explorer and joined the army. In 1883 he was posted to the disputed Kuril Islands, the sub-arctic archipelago between northern Japan and Siberian Russia. Nobu was involved in the exploration of these islands over two winters where he experienced extreme weather conditions.

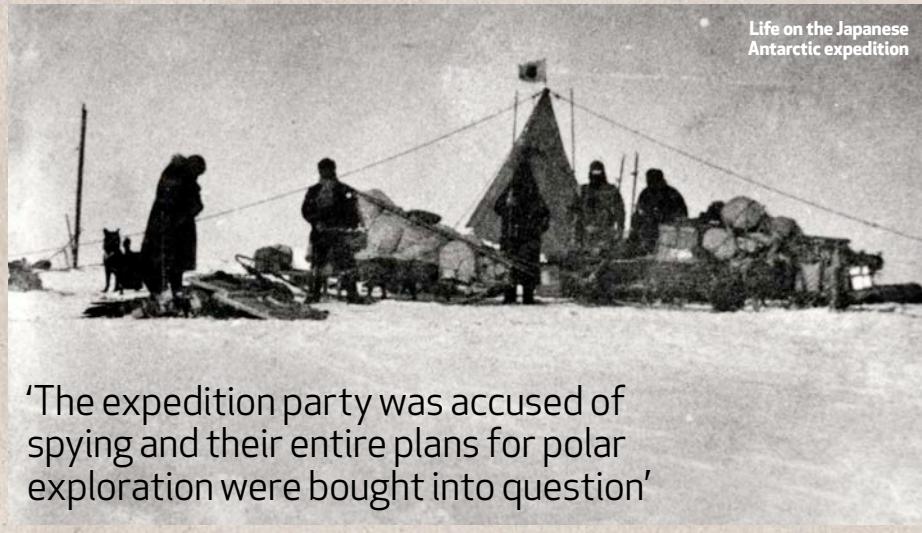
Japanese Antarctic expedition

During his time in the Kuril Islands, Nobu made plans to become the first person to travel to the North Pole. But when American explorer Robert E Peary claimed to reach the North Pole in 1909, he turned his sights to the South Pole.

Unfortunately, there wasn't much interest in such exploration in Japanese society – it had only become legal to leave the country in 1868 – and he had difficulties finding financial backing from either the government or the public at large. Eventually he did manage to secure limited support, which enabled him to obtain a small ship, supplies and equipment, and in December 1910 the Japanese Antarctic Expedition, consisting of 27 men and 30 dogs, left Tokyo aboard the *Kainan Maru* (the 'Southern Pioneer'). Like Amundsen and Scott, he hoped to over-winter in Antarctica before pushing for the pole the following spring, but the delay in finding funding had left him a good month behind the other expeditions.

After a brief stop in New Zealand, the *Kainan Maru* continued south through ferocious storms and hundreds of drifting icebergs. When the expedition reached the Ross Sea, off the coast of Antarctica, conditions became even worse, and they realised it would be impossible to land on the ice of Victoria Land. Instead, Nobu decided to turn ship and head for Australia, where they were forced to wait until the following southern summer before another attempt at landing in Antarctica – ending any hope of becoming the first to reach the South Pole.

During their stay in Australia, at a time when anti-Japanese sentiments were high, the expedition party was accused of spying and



'The expedition party was accused of spying and their entire plans for polar exploration were bought into question'



their entire plans for polar exploration were bought into question – not helped by the tiny, unlikely *Kainan Maru*, which was a third of the size of Scott's *Terra Nova*. But they did get encouragement and assistance from another polar explorer, Australian Tennatt David. The expedition team camped in the grounds of a large house while seeking further funding and extra supplies back in Japan. Six months after arriving in Sydney, the expedition set off for its second attempt at reaching Antarctica.

This time the team landed at the Ross Ice Shelf. Although Nobu's dream of being first to the Pole had slipped away, he still wanted to see how close he could get. In what they called a 'dash patrol,' he and five others travelled due south using sleds pulled by huskies. There were fierce blizzards, temperatures fell below

-25°C and some of the dogs died of frostbite. They stopped having covered 257km, reaching just over 80 degrees south, and raised the Japanese flag before returning to the ship.

At the same time, other members of the Japanese Antarctic Expedition surveyed the coastline and explored King Edward VII Land. After scaling ice walls the men reached the Alexandra Mountains before returning to the ship. When they were all back on board the *Kainan Maru* they left Antarctica, and in June 1912 arrived back in Japan to much celebration.

Later life

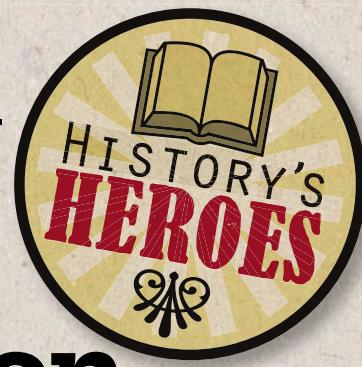
Any fame was short lived and Nobu's expedition to Antarctica was largely forgotten. He spent many years paying back his huge loans, writing an account of the expedition and giving talks around Japan to pay off the debts. He and his wife Yasu led an impoverished life, and Nobu died in 1946, aged 85.

An extraordinary adventure traveller

Nobu Shirase was an extraordinary adventure traveller, leading a Japanese expedition to Antarctica on a shoestring at a time when such adventures were unheard of in Japan. Despite all the setbacks, he fulfilled his childhood dream by travelling deep into the continent – and all team members returned safely.

Further reading

I recommend the book *1912: The Year the World Discovered Antarctica* by Chris Turney and the article 'Scott, Amundsen... and Nobu Shirase' at www.newscientist.com. **AT**



WWW.FREETIME1.CO.UK

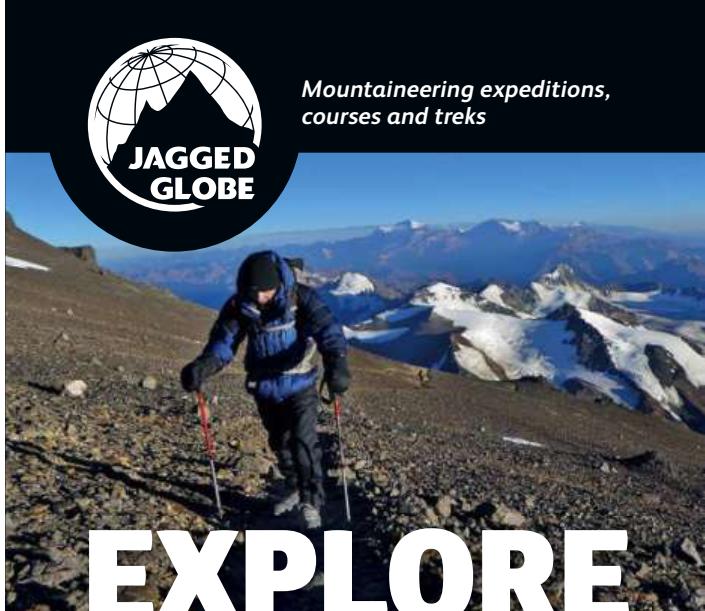
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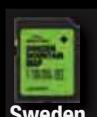


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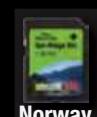
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Golden Age of Alpinism:
150th anniversary



Don't look down:
Andy Kirkpatrick



Pulling the birds:
Steve Backshall



Diary dates

Inspirational events to get on the calendar

■ 150th anniversary of the Golden Age of Mountaineering

The Golden Age of Alpinism refers to the years 1854-1865, which was an intense period of exploration and adventure in the Alps, and 'mountaineering' was developed as a sport. The Golden Age reached its climax in 1865, 150 years ago, when 65 first ascents were made. 'Base camp' towns throughout the Alps, such as Zermatt and Cormeyeur, have been celebrating all season, as has Chamonix, where there are a range of exhibitions marking the anniversary. We like the sound of 'Amateur

Alpinists and their Guides,' hosted by the Compagnie des Guides de Chamonix, dedicated to the achievements of its elders, and '19th Century Artists of the Alpine Club,' never-moved-before treasures from the Alpine Club's archives, such as watercolours, engravings and diaries on display.

When 'n' where: Various exhibitions, films and theatre in Chamonix and neighbouring villages; some until the end of September, some until April next year.

How: See <http://1865.chamonix.fr> for all events and news.

■ Ocean Film Festival World Tour

Seven films that give over two hours of inspiring footage taken above and below the water's surface, documenting the power and beauty of the ocean and introducing divers, surfers, swimmers and oceanographers who live for the sea. We like the look of *A Small Surfer*, starring six-year-old Quincy Symonds; and *Devocean* (think about it, took me a while), featuring Bruno, who is paraplegic and uses the ocean to find a new path in life.

When 'n' where: Venues around the UK throughout September and October.

How: See www.oceanfilmfestival.co.uk; tickets cost about £13.50 with 25p of every ticket going to environmental charities Project Aware and Surfers Against Sewage.

■ Big Shakeout 2015

An adventure festival in the Peak District, organised by online gear company Alkit, with all proceeds supporting outdoor charities. Festival goers can either do their own thing during the day, or sign up for a



Who's with me?
Reel Rock fun



Under the sea:
Ocean Fest World Tour



Live music:
Big Shakeout

School of Adventure course such as caving, story telling, mountain biking, canoeing, fell running, navigation and more. In the evening everyone gets together to listen to live music, speakers or watch adventure films.

When 'n' where: 25-27 September, Thornbridge Outdoors, near Bakewell.

How: Adult weekend tickets cost £60; child weekend tickets £20; under 12s free. The pass includes two nights of camping, Saturday night's meal, a t-shirt, music, lectures, adventure films and some activities. Visit www.alpkit.com/bigshakeout.

■ Andy Kirkpatrick – Cold Mountain

Often described as *Touching the Void* meets Peter Kay, in his latest tour Andy will talk about guiding a group of BASE jumpers up one of the hardest mountains in the world in Antarctica. Should be gripping, funny and brutally honest, with X-rated language.

When 'n' where: Around the UK from the end of September until February.

How: Tickets cost about £15; for dates and venues see www.andy-kirkpatrick.com.

■ Ben Fogle – Call of the Wild

Ben Fogle has rowed the Atlantic, crossed Antarctica on foot, run across the Sahara and crossed the Empty Quarter by camel. In his Call of the Wild show, he will recount how a self-confessed urbanite became so obsessed with adventure, travel and the harsh challenges of life in the wilderness.

When 'n' where: Around the UK from the end of September until the end of October.

How: Tickets cost about £22. For dates see www.speakersfromthedge.com.

■ Reel Rock 10 Tour

A collection of adventure and climbing films telling the stories and struggles of the most exciting vertical achievements from the past year, including an exclusive look at the Dawn Wall free ascent, an epic traverse across the jagged peaks of Patagonia and a tribute to Dean Potter.

When 'n' where: Around the UK, from the end of September to the end of October.

How: Tickets cost about £12; for dates and venues see www.reelrock.co.uk.

■ A Mountain to Climb

A charity event hosted by mountaineering company Jagged Globe, raising money to help re-build Nepal. Alan Hinkes, the only Brit to have climbed the world's fourteen 8,000m mountains, will compère, with speakers including mountaineer and author Andy Cave; rugby player turned extreme adventurer Richard Parks, and high-altitude mountaineer Adele Pennington.

When 'n' where: Thursday 8 October, Sheffield Students' Union Auditorium.

How: Tickets cost £20. Call 0114 276 3322 or go to <http://shop.jagged-globe.co.uk>.

■ Steve Backshall – Wild World Tour

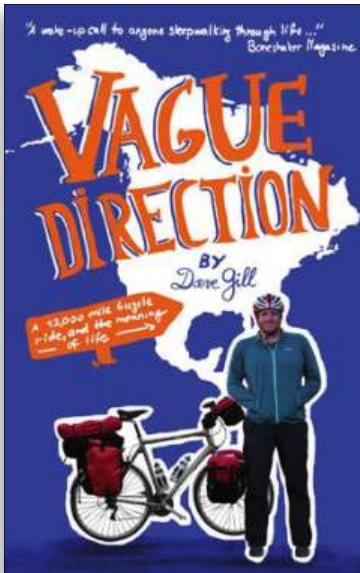
Steve is best known for *Deadly 60* on CBBC, but this tour will have something for both kids and grown ups, with tales from expeditions to the world's wildest places meeting some of its most bizarre creatures. Fun.

When 'n' where: Around the UK from mid October to mid November.

How: Tickets cost about £19.50; visit www.stevebackshall.com. 

Media mash

Rosie Fuller on the latest books and films from the world of adventurous travel



Vague Direction

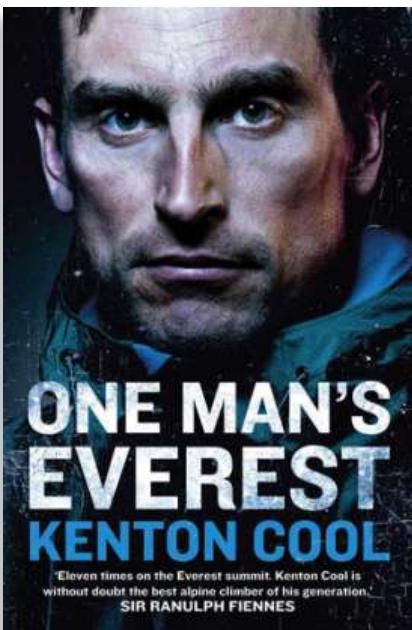
Dave Gill

£12.99

Dave Gill begins his story as a burnt out director in a struggling company who, with stress levels at an all time high, quits the business and sells everything to cycle round America. Probably I'm old and patronising, but I laughed when I read later in the story that he was only 24. Either way, the book is a really nice read. Starting in New York, Dave cycles in a huge clockwise loop, going south to Florida, west (with a run-in with the Mexican border) to California and then all the way up to Fairbanks, Alaska, before making his way through Canada and back to New York – a year long journey covering 12,000 miles. The book is light-hearted, easy to read and funny, although

it also covers the dark side of taking on such a mammoth journey and especially going it alone – you definitely don't get the impression that it's all fun, with the challenges being mental as well as physical. Fans of proper apostrophe use will find themselves cringing, but it's worth it.

www.vaguedirection.com



One Man's Everest

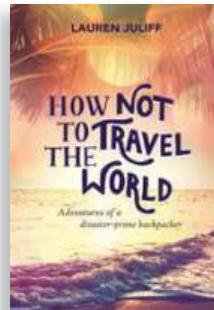
Kenton Cool

£20

I devoured this book by Kenton Cool, self-confessed 'celebrity mountain guide,' who's climbed Everest a whopping 11 times. It begins with a graphic description of a climbing fall that left him with two shattered heels – he's told he'll never walk properly again, let alone climb. It's a bleak period but the determination Kenton shows to get back into the mountains is astonishing. Then there are plenty of funny stories from early expedition attempts – broken down vans, booze and general youthful chaos – before moving to more serious trips and eventually an ascent of a previously unclimbed ridge on Annapurna III, where the three-man team push themselves

almost beyond their limits, physically and mentally. Reading stories of some of Kenton's Everest climbs, including with Sir Ranulph Fiennes, is fascinating. And the final chapter of the book is interesting too – it deals with some of the controversy surrounding Everest, and claims made by other mountaineers that Kenton has 'sold out' by becoming a guide and making money from climbing. I enjoyed learning more about one of Britain's most famous names in climbing, it's an engrossing read and there are lots of photos too.

www.randomhouse.co.uk



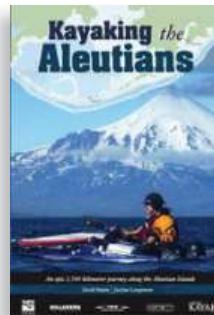
How Not To Travel The World

Lauren Juliff

£9.99

When Lauren Juliff leaves the UK to go travelling, she is suffering from anxiety, battling an eating disorder and has a broken heart. She also self-confessedly has no life experience, zero common sense and a comfort zone the size

of a pea. While it is admirable to go travelling under these circumstances, I couldn't feel much sympathy for her, and it was a struggle to stick with the book until the end, although it did get more interesting when she described the difficulties she faced returning home for a brief period; noting that travel had built up a wall between her and her family. Something of a female version of *An Idiot Abroad*. www.summersdale.com



Kayaking the Aleutians

£19.99 (DVD)

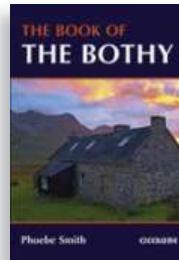
£14.99 (download)

When I started watching this sea kayaking epic I was amazed that I had never heard of the Aleutian Islands – not just because of my geographical ignorance, but because they are so remote, stunning and full of wildlife that I'm surprised they aren't on every David Attenborough-style TV show. The largely unpopulated islands stretch from Russia to Alaska, and in this film explorers Sarah Outen and Justine Curnen become the first people to sea kayak them in a 2,500km, 100-day journey.

What a challenge. The kayakers have to tackle long crossings between islands, facing stormy seas with unknown currents. And conditions on land aren't much less daunting – often the islands are too rocky for them to land, and when they do they're joined by roaring sea lions or brown bears. The DVD includes two versions of the film – I went for the shorter option, but wished I'd watched the longer one.

www.cackletv.com **AT**

READER OFFER!



In the May/June edition of *Adventure Travel* we ran a feature about bothies, which are 'stone tents' in the mountains that hikers and climbers can camp out in for free. The article was an extract from *The Book of the Bothy*, which is out now, and AT readers get a 25% discount by entering the code BT25ATMG at www.cicerone.co.uk. Bargain.

How to... run an adventure festival



Ever thought you and your mates could put on an outdoor festival? Belinda Kirk, organiser of Base Camp Festival, gives us her top 10 tips...

1 Location location

Find an inspiring venue. Base Camp Festival is held in the Peak District, surrounded by climbing, caving, mountain biking, white water and our own private woods.

2 Well-known names

Bring in some of Britain's top explorers. They will not only share experiences in talks in the evening, but could also lead some of the activities during the day.

3 Plenty of adventures

Make sure there is a wide range of activities that people can join. Ours are mostly open to complete beginners, others are for improvers and pros. River-tubing, slacklining, fat-bike riding, caving, pack-rafting, survival, adventure yoga and white-water rafting are just some of the activities this year.

4 Expert instruction

People love to learn from the experts. At Base Camp you can attend a workshop on independent book publishing with explorer Jason Lewis; learn how to plan an expedition with polar explorer Ann Daniels or get tips on budget backpacking from 'the broke backpacker' Will Hatton.

'Running an adventure festival is not that dissimilar to running an expedition'

5 Build a great team

Running an adventure festival has turned out to be not that dissimilar to running an expedition. Initially it's about coming up with a new idea, but 99% of it is the graft that follows. To get the job done well you need people you can rely on. I have a fabulous core team.

6 Get the logistics right

Again like running an expedition, getting the details right is crucial. The less glamorous stuff like parking, litter and toilets need to work.

7 Provide good food

An army marches on its stomach and so does an adventure crowd. At Base Camp a big hog roast is provided on Saturday night (vegan option available too).

8 A likeminded crowd

Everyone is welcome at Base Camp no matter what their adventure credentials are, but one thing is necessary: you

must be up for an adventure. Being surrounded by likeminded people is inspiring in itself.

9 Good bands

What makes Base Camp a new idea is that it's a celebration of adventure in what feels like a traditional music festival. We camp together in one big tribe, and as night falls it's time to dance under the stars to live music.

10 A well stocked bar

All my best adventures were cooked up among friends while sipping on a gin and tonic. Base Camp is for life. We want to inspire those that join us, equip them with extra skills and connect them with others to go on an adventure after the festival. **AT**



Belinda Kirk is an expedition leader, film director and world record holder. She's also founder of the adventure hub Explorers Connect. Base Camp Festival takes place each September. This year's event has sold out; see www.basecampfestival.co.uk for tickets to 2016's event.



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p35

Cycle Holland

'This was my first attempt at touring with panniers and I was amazed at how much I could carry'



Hike Sweden

'A unique landscape has evolved, full of rocky coastlines, forests, beaches, lakes of all sizes, waterfalls, bogs, strange glacial rock deposits and many, many impressive views'

Short breaks

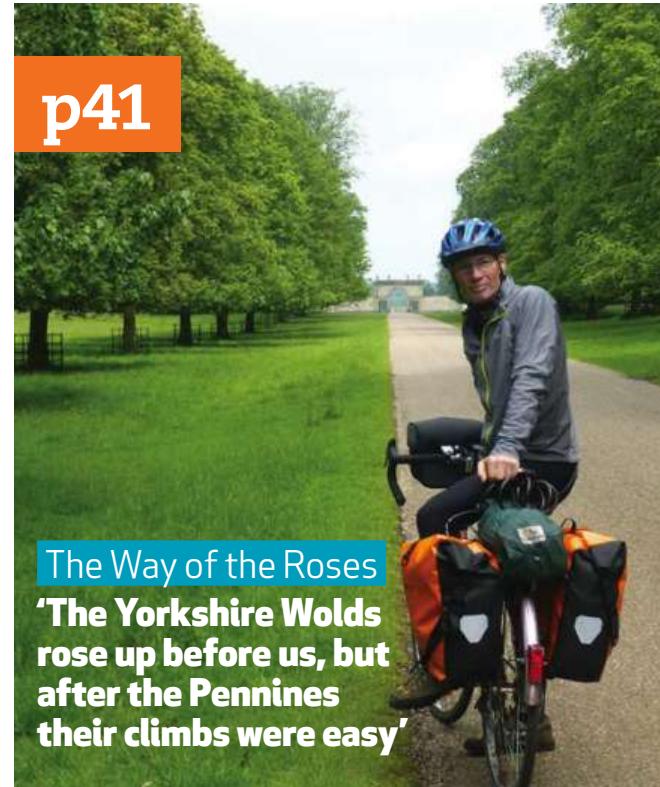
Short on time? Awesome adventures closer to home



p39

Hike and bike, Inner Hebrides

'We make it a real sea-to-summit expedition by dipping our hiking-booted toes into the loch before setting off'



p41

The Way of the Roses

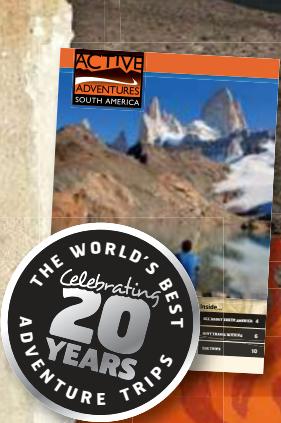
'The Yorkshire Wolds rose up before us, but after the Pennines their climbs were easy'

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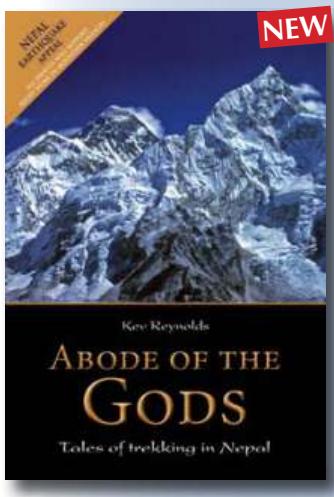
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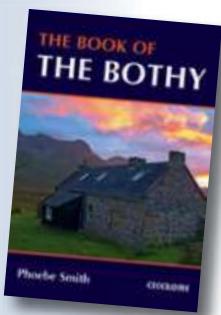
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Going Dutch

It's flat, impeccably geared up for bikes and there's good beer and cheese. Holland is an excellent place for a cycle tour, says Rosie Fuller



Holland? That's not very Adventure Travel," said everyone, when I told them I was going cycling in the Netherlands. Sure, Holland isn't renowned for wilderness and has no mountains, but how can loading up a bike, ditching the car and boarding a ferry to a foreign country be anything but exciting?

I'd heard Holland is flat, and that it is well set up for cycling, but I wasn't prepared for how accurate both of these descriptions are. I consider Warwickshire, where I live, to be flat, but you can still clock up a good few hundred metres of ascent on a road ride. In Holland, we mapped an 80km ride and it showed just 60ft of ascent.

Similarly being geared up for cycling. When we arrived (from Harwich in Essex) at the small port of the Hook of Holland, our first job was to find a bike shop as friend Emma had forgotten her cycling shoes. In a town of 10,000

people, there were three bike shops to choose from. And that's just the beginning. Pretty much every Dutch road has a cycle lane, complete with its own mini traffic lights, and often bikes have priority over cars at junctions.

Everyone cycles – old, young, very old, very young – and we saw every possible example of bike: tandems, side-by-side tandems, bikes with trailers, bikes carrying goods in a wheelbarrow-style box at the front, bikes with child seats on the front, child seats on the back or both; bikes with adults carrying another grown-up perched daintily on the back... It's a normal part of life.

We began looking out for more Dutch stereotypes as, propelled by the new shoes, we made our way towards Rotterdam. There were plenty of modern wind turbines as we rode on a car-free bike path along the coast, busy with huge boats and industry, and it wasn't long before we saw our first old-fashioned windmill too. After ➤



'Pretty much every Dutch road has a cycle lane, complete with its own mini traffic lights'



Rotterdam the next Dutch item to tick off – cheese – was easy as we hit Gouda, although we soon realised that we preferred the directly named ‘Dutch beer cheese.’ Perfect with an Amstel.

We also began to understand how to navigate the cycle network. While towns and cities are signposted, these signs generally take you the quickest and not-so-scenic (though still bike-friendly) route. Better is to use the *knooppunten* system of junction points. Each regional cycle network is a grid of routes, interspersed with numbered junction points. The junction points are signed, and you navigate by linking them together. Once I’d got my head around the fact that we were aiming for a number, rather than being on a route of a particular number, it was simple, although by the end of a day in the saddle our heads were spinning from all the numbers.

Another thing Holland is known for is water and, again, I didn’t realise how true-to-life this is until we saw streets and streets of houses surrounded by waterways. It’s picturesque and calming, and I wondered if it made the Dutch feel peaceful. They were always friendly – chatty in cafes and campsites, and offering help if we looked lost.

In the evenings we stayed in small campsites, usually with only a couple of other tents, apart from one that was hosting a back-to-nature wedding, where we fell asleep listening to traditional celebrations. One campsite was on an old fort, part of the Hollandic Water Line – a system of waterways created in the 17th century that could be flooded to keep enemies out.

From Gouda we went to Utrecht (beer and pizza by the canal in the sun) and then past Amersfoort and Hilversum until, after three days of cycling, we reached Amsterdam. I’d been to the capital once before, but seeing it by bike was much better. And, with the perspective of having visited other parts of the country first, we realised that some of the things Holland is famous for are not entirely reflective of the country as a whole...

Ridiculously well set up for cycling and with friendly people, Holland is an excellent place to try out cycle touring. Next time I’d like to go south and combine it with a trip to Belgium. Although I’m not sure how I’d cope if there were any hills... **AT**



Waterways galore: a traditional Dutch scene

Need more info?



Get there

We took the Stena Line ferry from Harwich in Essex to the Hook of Holland. It takes about seven hours and cost £44.50 each way with a bike, although we paid a small amount extra for a cabin. There are two departures a day; the 11pm departure from Harwich meant we didn’t need to take a day off work and got a night of accommodation included in the ferry price.

Other ferry routes from the UK are Hull to Rotterdam with P&O and Newcastle to Amsterdam with DFDS Seaways.



Planning a route

We alternated, partly using the Dutch *knooppunten*, or junction point system, partly using Google Maps. The *knooppunten* system is clever; remember that you are cycling towards a number, rather than on a cycle path of that specific number. You’ll need a map showing the junction points: we took the ‘Basiskaart netwerk LF-routes cycling atlas’, which showed cycle routes on small, water-resistant maps. It costs €24.95; see www.nederlandfietsland.nl/en.

These routes were quiet and pretty but

occasionally long-winded – if we needed to go somewhere in a hurry, we used Google Maps. On our final day we took the train from Amsterdam to the Hook of Holland, which was easy even with bikes.



Where to stay

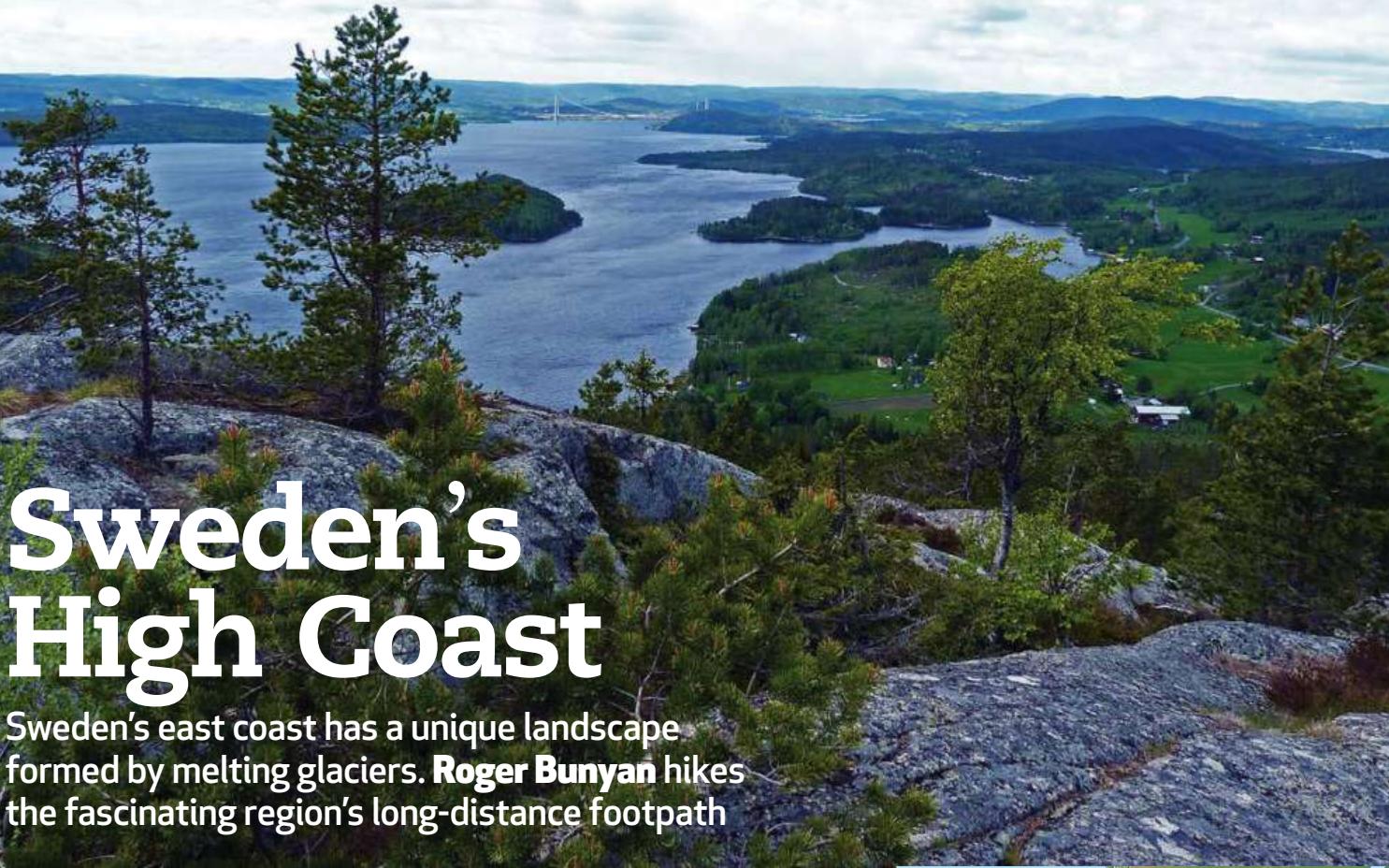
We camped, choosing ‘natural campsites’ from the website www.natuurkampeerterreinen.nl/en. These were small, cheap and quiet, but still with showers and running water. In Amsterdam we used an Airbnb.



What to take

I fit a tent, sleeping bag and mat, food, often beer, a change of clothes, waterproof, a plate, mug, spork and gas for cooking plus bike spares, a lock and tools into two panniers (my friends carried the stove and pans). I got bike accessories such as a bike tool and a pannier rack from LifeLine, one of Wiggle’s own brands (www.wiggle.co.uk/lifeline). If you’re visiting cities, particularly Amsterdam, take a good bike lock and be vigilant.

You could do this trip on any bike – there are no hills, you don’t need to go off road and there are bike shops in every town.



Sweden's High Coast

Sweden's east coast has a unique landscape formed by melting glaciers. **Roger Bunyan** hikes the fascinating region's long-distance footpath



Half way along the east coast of Sweden, during the last Ice Age, stood the thickest part of a huge glacier that stretched all the way from the Arctic to the British Isles. At what is now called the 'High Coast' region of Sweden, the glacial ice was three kilometres thick. Eventually it melted, reducing the weight upon the land and allowing the surrounding terrain to rise. It was like a cushion rising after being slept on by an enormous Scandinavian troll.

The land is still rising at a rate of around 8mm every year, the highest land uplift in the world today. With this upward movement a unique landscape has evolved, full of rocky coastlines, hills, forests, cliffs, beaches, lakes of all sizes, waterfalls, bogs, strange glacial rock deposits and many impressive views. To celebrate the distinctive landscape, a 130km path called the Högakustenleden, or High Coast Trail,

has been created. The trail starts at the Höga Kusten suspension bridge at Hornöberget in the south and finishes at Örnsköldsvik in the north.

The trail is well developed with good signposting. There are huts, campsites and other accommodation along the way, and it takes about a week to hike. If you had a few extra days, you could explore some of the detours.

I spent a few days exploring the Högakustenleden, the first with my wife's cousin Marja, who lives in the area. We trekked a section that crosses the small Skuleskogen National Park. In heavy rain, our day began by walking through forest, where boulders and slippery roots slowed our progress. Many of the trees had fairytale beard lichen growing from their branches. Sometimes wooden boards were used through the bog.

We continued uphill by swollen waterfalls until we came to a sheer-sided split in the hillside called the ➤



'My destination was another picturesque inlet, surrounded by a delicate jigsaw of land, sea, sky and shoreline'



Slåtdalsskrevan. This is a 200m long, 40m deep crevice that, on this particular day, had mini waterfalls plummeting down its cliffs, and an atmospheric Norse mist.

We passed mounds of rounded rocks, all showing signs of glacial action with striations, scars and scratches. They were sculptured when the glacier slowly moved over their surfaces. Walking along the spongy shore of a lake, we also came across moose droppings. Marja explained that there are many moose in the High Coast area, but they avoid humans, especially during summer. Most wild creatures here are usually only seen in winter; also roaming the region are lynx, bears, roe deer, golden eagles and capercaillie.

Next we met a greater expanse of lapping water – the Baltic Sea. If you crossed it through the murk, it would lead to Finland. And there was one more feature of the day: beaver activity! Where the sea met the forest, there was an area of fallen trees where they had been ‘beavering away,’ making material for their dams and lodges. We could see teeth marks on stumps and branches.

Over the next few days I enjoyed detours from the Högakustenleden on the narrow paths that criss-cross the region. And on the last day I completed another section of the Högakustenleden, this time on my own.

I was dropped off so I could hike from Lövvik to Fjärdbotten. It wasn't long before I took an official detour from the main path, to the 250m Valkallen Hill, where there's a 360-degree view of forest, sea, lakes and islands. The hill has been useful to the Swedes – in 1721 observers on the top warned of a Russian invasion from the east. Also on the summit is a beautifully constructed wooden hut for hikers, one of the tidiest and most cared for huts I have seen.

Tearing myself away, I headed down through forest and along a sandy inlet until the path changed and became quite bouldery. It's not a place to just get into your stride and speed along – you need to have your wits about you to tackle the ever-changing terrain while at the same time enjoying the sights.

My destination was another picturesque inlet at Fjärdbotten, surrounded by a jigsaw of land, sea, sky and shoreline. It signified the end of my visit to the High Coast, a spectacular corner of this Scandinavian land. **AT**



Rocky walkway: the 40m deep crevice

Need more info?



Get there

Fly to Stockholm Arlanda Airport. From there you can then fly internally to Höga Kusten Airport or to Örnsköldsvik Airport, or get the train to Sundsvall, Örnsköldsvik or Kramfors, or there are coaches from Stockholm to the High Coast.



Where to stay

There is a variety of accommodation along the trail. Huts are free, but you'll need to take a sleeping bag and mat. See all the options on the Högakusten High Coast Trail website, www.hogakusten.com/en/hk/high-coast-trail.html.



When to go

July and August are the most popular, when the weather is more stable and Sweden enjoys typically British summer temperatures. Autumn is also apparently beautiful.



What to take

Take usual walking gear for hiking in a temperate climate, including suitable waterproofs

and a comfortable rucksack. If you're staying in huts, you'll need a sleeping bag and mat.



The trail

The Högakustenleden is 130km long and can generally be walked in a week. The trail is easy to follow, with good signposts and dots of paint. I also had a useful booklet, the *Höga Kusten Trail Guide*, which has good route descriptions and quality maps. It indicates where you can find drinking water, shops, accommodation, good views and points of interest. Also visit the website www.hogakusten.com/en/hk/high-coast-trail.html, for more on accommodation and to download a guide to each of the sections of the walk.



Additional activities

The High Coast area is good for other adventurous activities too. Kayaking is popular along the extensive coast and many inlets; try High Coast Kayak (www.hogakustenkayak.se) for equipment and guiding.

The biggest and highest via ferrata centre in northern Europe is not far from the High Coast Trail at Naturum Högakusten. See www.viaferrata.se.



Magic Mull

Mull is the second largest island in the Inner Hebrides. Not only is it wild and spectacular, but the ferry there is about to get cheaper, says Rosie Fuller



"The locals here probably don't bother looking at the weather forecast," says my friend Maria. We're on the Scottish island of Mull, and each evening the forecast for the next day has been somewhere between a monsoon and the apocalypse. But somehow we keep getting lucky, with even some days of sunshine.

At about 45 miles long and 25 miles at the widest point, Mull is the second largest island in the Inner Hebrides (Skye is the biggest) and the fourth largest in Scotland. In real terms this means that it takes about 1.5 hours to drive from the picturesque capital of Tobermory to Fionnphort, on the other side of the island (bearing in mind the roads are small and twisty), where you can get a ferry to the tiny island of Iona. It also means there's plenty to keep us occupied for a week of hiking, cycling and exploring.

There's one Munro, Ben More, whose

claim to fame is that it's the only Munro you need to travel by boat to get to – it's a 45-minute ferry journey to Mull (there are Munros on Skye but it has a road bridge). Not that we need any excuse to climb it. Parking on the shore we make it a real sea-to-summit expedition by dipping our hiking-booted toes into the loch before setting off up every one of its 966 metres.

It's a bit of a slog but I find the gradient just right – not too steep while still allowing us to gain height quickly. We don't quite get a view at the top, but after a hairy scramble down a ridge on to A' Chioch (867m), the clouds open to show us where we've just been, and the stunning scenery in every other direction, which is made even more spectacular by the lingering snow.

After another couple of short walks – spotting eagles from the Treshnish Headland and pottering to the lighthouse near Tobermory – the rest of the week's focus is on cycling. ➤



'The mountains dwarfing us are bleak and barren and it's exciting to be in the middle of them'



Ride number one is a loop starting and finishing at the village of Dervaig. We take the undulating, single track road to Calgary beach and follow it all the way around the coast to Salen, where there's excellent tea and cake at The Coffee Pot cafe. After a short stint on the A road – two-way traffic and everything – we cut back inland on a tiny road through the woods, covering 60km in total.

Loop number two is even better. Starting in Salen, we cycle into a headwind to Craignure, where the ferry from the mainland comes in. After Craignure the road goes inland. The word 'epic' is overused but it feels justified here – the mountains dwarfing us are bleak and barren and it's exciting to be in the middle of them; not many cars, our bright cycling jackets contrasting with the brown hills.

After a good climb and a top-speed descent we reach the coast and turn on to a small road marked as the scenic route back to Salen. It is seriously scenic. We cycle beneath breath-taking cliffs that have shed huge boulders. "It looks about time more fell off," says my geologist friend Cathryn, and I'm not entirely sure she's joking. There are sections with only a crash barrier separating us from a drop to the waves below; further along sheep and cows graze on the shore. Road markers that have been there for over 100 years count down the miles to Salen, although our favourite is the slightly more modern board stating 'The Coffee Pot cafe, 2½ miles.'

Coach loads of tourists bypass most of Mull entirely, crossing the island only to get to Iona, which is known as the cradle of Christianity in Scotland. But whether you're interested in making a religious pilgrimage or, like us, not, Iona is an enchanting place to visit.

We park about 10 miles away from the ferry port of Fionnphort and cycle the rest of the way there, exploring little coves and the village of Bunessan en route. When we arrive on Iona we climb an irresistible little hill to the highest point on the island and find picturesque sandy beaches in the north. We also notice that our perspective has changed again, and we now refer to Mull as the 'mainland.'

Then we sample a couple of cafes. The cake is good, but on this occasion people-watching is the highlight – real tourists are strange breeds... **AT**



Seductive Scotland: the view from Mull's Munro

Need more info?



Get there

Most people get to Mull on a 45-minute ferry from Oban to the port of Craignure. For us the ferry cost about £100 return for a car and about £10 return for a foot passenger, but with the introduction of Road Equivalent Tariffs in October this will drop to about £3.45 for a foot passenger and £13 for a car (one way). See www.calmac.co.uk for times and tickets; there are about six sailings a day. Oban is about 2.5 hours' drive from Glasgow, or it has a railway station if you're using public transport. Alternatively there are smaller ferries running from Lochaline on the mainland to Fishnish on Mull, or Kilchoan on the mainland to Tobermory on Mull.



Stay there

We stayed in a self-catering cottage in Tobermory, the island's charming capital (population about 700), which has a selection of pubs and shops including a fairly large Co-op. The village of Salen is more central and might be more convenient for exploring the rest of the island, but there are fewer shops and places to eat.



When to go

Summer months should be best, although it's Scotland, so anything can happen. In early May we got lucky with the weather and avoided any midges, although it was still cold and there was plenty of snow on Ben More.



What to take

Your usual kit for cycling and walking, bearing in mind that the weather might be unpredictable and cold – even when it was sunny I was cycling in about five layers. Gaiters are useful as the walks can be boggy and wet; binoculars would be a good idea for wildlife watchers. Most of my gang took hybrid bikes and wore trainers rather than clip-in cycling shoes so we could get off and explore whenever we felt like it. Insect repellent is wise.



Books

The Cicerone guide *Scotland's Far West*, by Denis Brook and Phil Hincliffe, has loads of walks (www.cicerone.co.uk). I read the novel *The Letters of Ivor Punch* by local author and musician Colin MacIntyre.



Coming up Roses

Steve Livingston cycles the Way of the Roses – a 170-mile coast-to-coast route through Lancashire and Yorkshire



The Way of the Roses doesn't involve cycling through pretty rose gardens. The name is taken from the red and white rose symbols of Lancashire and Yorkshire, as the ride goes across both counties, coast to coast, from Morecambe to Bridlington. It also goes up some seriously steep hills. We planned to do it in four days and knew that it would be no bed of roses.

The beginning was delightfully easy. My wife Pam and I left the beaches of Morecambe Bay on a sunny Friday and followed a tarmaced railway line to Lancaster, then crossed the River Lune Millennium Bridge. At the Crook o' Lune viewpoint we joined our first road and celebrated mid morning with ice creams in the village of Hornby.

Soon after that we left Red Rose country and entered Yorkshire. Ahead we could see the hills of the Yorkshire Dales. At the base of Ingleborough

we began to toil as we changed to our lowest gears to pedal our loads uphill. We were overtaken by three cyclists on lightweight bikes who cheerfully commented that we were doing well for not getting off to push. We ignored their enthusiasm and concentrated on the new upland landscape around us; the rising limestone hills framed with dry stone walls and dotted with sheep. Our reward came at aptly named Far End, where we could freewheel down for miles to the popular town of Settle.

Then it was the biggie. Our encouraging guidebook stated that there was no harm in pushing your bike up this hill. Pam was determined not to. However, after cycling out of town on the cobbles, we reached a sign that made us stop. One in five, it said. The road looked vertical, for miles.

"I'm going," said Pam, and set off. I had to follow. To climb that hill on a light road bike would have been a challenge. Heavily laden with camping



'To climb that hill on a light road bike would have been a challenge. Laden with camping gear, it was purgatory'



gear, it was purgatory. We may have felt proud of ourselves, but we would have been less exhausted if we'd walked the bikes up. Still, we deserved the long ride down to Kirby Malham and camped above there, at the village of Malham, that night.

The next day was damp and muggy. We packed the wet tent and rode on, toiling up to the highest point at Stump Cross Caverns (about 400m), before dropping steeply down to Pateley Bridge. There was just one more big hill, up to the bizarre Brimham Rocks, before we were freewheeling again, through Fountains Abbey and its medieval deer park, and then on to Ripon. Stone walls disappeared and were replaced by hedgerows. We may not have been cycling through a rose garden, but the sun came out and a wealth of buttercups, cow parsley and red campions brightened our way.

We were in the Vale of York now. It was flat and we cruised easily. Our campsite in Linton-on-Ouse was advertised as being by locks on the river. The only indication of a place to stay was a pub, so I went in to ask. "Yes," said the barman, "this is the camping reception." I had the pleasure of booking a plot and ordering a pint at the same time. Our pitch was on a grassy ledge above the riverbank. It was perfect, especially as the pub served generous helpings of food.

The next morning we reached York. We parked up and explored The Shambles near the minster before setting off again on dedicated cycle ways. It was impressive that we could ride through the city without mixing with traffic.

Out in the countryside our route continued on prepared cycle ways, tiny lanes and gravel tracks. The Yorkshire Wolds rose up before us, but after the Pennines their climbs were easy. We stopped for a wet night's camp at Garton-on-the-Wolds.

Thankfully, the sky was blue in the morning. We had only 25 miles to go. By mid morning we could see the sea sparkling ahead. Bridlington unfolded as we picked our way through its streets. Soon we were on the seaside promenade where we stopped before a notice that looked the same as the one we had left four days ago. This time the sign pointed to Morecambe, 170 miles away. We were immensely satisfied. **AT**



Need more info?



Get there

The route is usually done from west to east because this gives the best chance of having the wind behind you. Don't depend on it though! It starts in Morecambe on the Lancashire coast and finishes in Bridlington in Yorkshire. Morecambe can be reached by train from Lancaster, and trains to Bridlington connect with York. Northern Rail, which operates from these coastal towns, allows bikes without a reservation. Officially only a maximum of two bikes per train are allowed, but the guidebook says you can have more. Anyway, we travelled by car, getting friends to drop us off.

generally follows dedicated cycle ways or single-track roads, holiday traffic shouldn't be a problem. A good time to go is early summer or autumn, though as with any British break, the weather is pot luck.



Gear

There is only one short, easy section of gravelled track, so we took road bikes with panniers. Take a multi-purpose bike tool, spare inner tubes and a pump. There are bicycle repair shops on the way (shown in the guidebook). If you stay in B&Bs or hotels you don't need a lot; just waterproofs, warmer layers and a few light clothes for the evening as it's good to get changed, especially if you're going out to eat in the evening. But travel light – there are serious hills to carry gear up! If you are camping, be even more vigilant about only taking minimum gear.



Where to stay

There are a variety of places to stay. The website www.wayoftheroses.info lists B&Bs, hostels and campsites; the Sustrans guidebook has a selection of bicycle friendly B&Bs, and campsites and hostels are marked on the Way of the Roses map.



Guidebook and maps

The route is usually done from west to east because this gives the best chance of having the wind behind you. Don't depend on it though! The definitive guide and map is Sustrans' 'Way of the Roses,' which can be bought from www.sustransshop.co.uk.



When to go

Any time of the year. Accommodation is busiest during holidays, but as the route

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CLASSIC
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Alpine magic



It's one of the world's classic treks. **Rosie Fuller** hikes through France, Switzerland and Italy on the Tour du Mont Blanc



The Tour du Mont Blanc could be called the cheese trek – we get to try a new cheese from a different region every day,” says guide Elodie Breband.

“Mind you, that’s true of almost any trek in the Alps,” she adds.

The Tour du Mont Blanc takes trekkers from France, into Switzerland and then into Italy before returning to France, so it’s not only the cheese that’s good – Swiss chocolate and Italian gelato are pretty satisfying after a long day of hiking too.

This is one of the world’s classic treks. It offers spectacular views of Western Europe’s highest peak, beautiful alpine walking through flower-

filled meadows, tough yet rewarding mountain passes to climb, and the chance to spot marmots, eagles and, of course, cattle for all that cheese, the bells around their necks providing a jangling soundtrack. We even see a couple of vipers – not something I expected to see in the Alps, but definitely adding to the excitement.

Another plus is the number of different ways of hiking the route. The complete circuit takes about 11 days, and you can do it either clockwise or anticlockwise. But for those who, like me, can’t take that long off work, it’s possible to do a seven-day version of the trek, helped along by a couple of short bus journeys. Then there are different route and accommodation options depending on how late or early in the season you hike; how tough you

want it to be and the level of comfort you expect from your lodgings. You don’t even have to walk the Tour – we see groups of mountain bikers, and it’s becoming popular to run the path over a few days too.

I’ve joined a trek organised by the company Utracks, which uses mules to carry luggage from one mountain refuge to the next. “Using mules means we can be autonomous,” says Elodie. “We don’t need to rely on vehicle support, so we can stay in higher refuges that cars can’t reach.”

The mule for our 12-person group is called Nikita. We have a weight allowance of 7kg for our overnight bags to make sure that she isn’t overburdened, which Elodie enforces by weighing each bag at the start of the trek. I was worried that trekking with



Pony power: using mules to help carry the gear

a mule might seem a bit gimmicky, but actually it adds another element to the hike. We travel at Nikita's speed, pausing when she wants a rest or getting going when she decides we've been slacking for long enough. Walking with an animal adds to the feeling of calm created by being out in the mountains, and Nikita is part of the team. Mind you, we all quickly learn not to walk downwind of her first thing in the morning...

Our group has come from all over the world to do the trek: America, Canada and Australia as well as France, Ireland, Sweden and the UK, and ages range from late 20s to early 70s. The mix of people is a real highlight. Elodie speaks French and English and imparts endless information in both; the rest of us display varying levels of foreign ➤





Tough climb: hiking up to Fenêtre d'Arpette

3 MORE... AMAZING TREKS IN THE ALPS



Trekking guide Elodie Breband from Utracks tells us three more of her favourite multi-day hikes in the Alps

1 The Dolomites

The Dolomites are totally different to the rest of the Alps – there are no glaciers and the colours of the mountains are incredible. The refuges and food are amazing too.

2 Gran Paradiso traverse

A traverse of Gran Paradiso, the highest mountain solely in Italy, is wild as it's in a national park – you really feel lost from the world. The only civilisation is farms and mountain refuges and you only meet marmots. We offer the option to climb Gran Paradiso (4,061m) at the end of the trek too.

3 Chamonix to Zermatt

Lots of glaciers and you get really close to lots of 4,000m peaks, finishing in Zermatt beneath the Matterhorn. You'll see more people than on a Gran Paradiso traverse, but it's still beautiful.

'Scenery is provided by the humongous Trient Glacier, roaring rivers running down from it'

language skills, although by the end of the trip we've all learnt to say cheers in Welsh and, in early July, we celebrate both Canada Day and Independence Day on the way round.

Our first day of trekking should be a gentle five hours of walking from Chamonix town centre to Le Tour at the end of the valley, although the weather soon makes it clear that nothing this week is going to be gentle. It's scorching, and set to get hotter. But we already have good views of Mont Blanc and the various ridges and peaks above Chamonix, decorated with brightly coloured paragliders, and these views are only set to get better too.

Day two is when the trek really gets going. From Le Tour we head up under a ski lift, away from civilisation and into Switzerland. Elodie explains that in the afternoon of the second day she likes to deviate slightly from the standard Tour du Mont Blanc route and follow a path that stays higher. It's slightly longer, but it gives us expansive views into a side of the valley that we wouldn't otherwise see, while walking through

pretty meadows. Even if you aren't into flowers, these are interesting. We learn that alpine flowers have to adapt to survive in the harsh conditions: often they're shorter, to withstand strong winds, and brighter as they only have a short time in bloom to attract insects. We see orchids, big purple daisies, mountain arnica, carnivorous flowers that trap bugs in their leaves and more.

Day three involves a decision. We can either take the tougher option – a steep, challenging climb involving over 1,000m of ascent to the Fenêtre d'Arpette – or a slightly longer but less steep walk with beautiful lake views. As conditions are good and the Fenêtre d'Arpette is snow-free, we're all keen to have a crack at it.

The first couple of hours are easy: alongside a raised water channel, we're in the shade and the gradient is gentle. The sun hits us at about the time the path gets steeper, but I relish the hard work. Scenery is provided by the humongous Trient Glacier to our right, roaring rivers running down from it, and it really is spectacular. ►



Glorious alpine scenery
(it was like this all week)



Pedal power: you can cycle or run the Tour du Mont Blanc too

The final part of the ascent is a scramble over rocks following red and white painted markers, with a few of us accidentally taking an even more exciting route. At the top of the pass, which is 2,665m in altitude and the highest we'll reach all week, we pose for photos on the rocks, and eat lunch with a daunting view of our route down.

The descent is as steep as the ascent, over slippery scree with patches of snow, before eventually getting easier. But the heat is pounding and there's no shade, so when we finally spot that evening's refuge, Relais d'Arpette, just above the village of Champex, it looks like a real oasis.

Relais d'Arpette is the winner in terms of accommodation for the week. There are only six people to a spacious bedroom, and each person has their own bed, unlike some of the refuges where we all sleep next to each other in a long line. There are also lots of showers, as opposed to often just one. It's slightly out of the village, so it's nice and peaceful, and the view of the mountains from the garden, where we drink cold beer under an umbrella, is something special.

The following day is valley-based, through Swiss villages with firewood stacked up on the side of each house and traditional wooden buildings for

'Walking with an animal adds to the feeling of calm created by being out in the mountains'



storing grain kept separate from the main settlements. Then it's into Italy for the night, up and over the Grand Col Ferret pass (2,537m), which is completely different to the steep climb of the Fenêtre d'Arpette: wide open scenery and a gentle gradient. We've been fantasising about Italian ice cream for days and when we reach the plush Italian resort of Cormayeur, feeling particularly scruffy and sweaty, it's everything we've been dreaming of.

The penultimate day is over another pass, the Col de la Seigne, where we can see Mont Blanc from the Italian side – not as impressive as its French side, not that I'm complaining. On the

way up we see marmots and a huge eagle, and at the top of the pass we can have one foot in Italy, the other in France. Another highlight of the day, on the way down, is stopping at a farm that makes Beaufort cheese, gawping at the stacks of huge circles of cheese in a cool, smelly storage room, each stamped with the date they were made.

After a night in something very similar to a garden shed at Les Chapieux, it's an early start for the final day: we set off at 7am to climb the Col de la Croix du Bonhomme (2,483m). A traverse along a rocky path keeps us high, so we can savour the mountains for as long as possible, and as we've walked at a good

speed, there's plenty of time for a drink in a refuge at our final lunch stop, above our finishing point of the picturesque church of Notre Dame de la Gorge.

I loved everything about this hike. If I could do it again, I would probably try Utracks' summer itinerary (we were on the last of its spring departures), where you sleep in refuges higher up the mountain, although that said, the thought of not having a shower after a day in that sun would have been unbearable. The company was great. The scenery was spectacular. The cosy sleeping arrangements added to the fun. And from now on I always want to hike with a mule. **AT**

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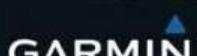
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PRESENTED BY
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FROM THE EDGE

Top trekking kit

Editor **Rosie Fuller** with the gear that she found most useful for hiking the Tour du Mont Blanc (in baking hot weather...)



Sunny hiking gear

Black Diamond

Stretch Font Shorts, £40

I tested these shorts (pictured) for our travel clothing review in the May/June edition of AT, and they've now proved themselves for a week of tough hiking too – they're very comfy, offering a great range of movement even on the steepest sections; there are a couple of good pockets and they look more fashionable than most hiking shorts.

www.blackdiamondequipment.com

Berghaus

Vapour Short-Sleeve Crew-Neck T-Shirt, £30

This baselayer is one of my staples for summer hiking and in this heat it excelled: it's extremely light, and I like that the sleeves are so short – they minimise silly tan lines while still protecting the shoulders from both the sun and a rucksack. It's also quick drying – I washed it every evening and it was always dry in time for the next day. The current version of the top doesn't have a zip (as mine does in the picture) but fabrics and cut are the same.

www.berghaus.com

Meindl

Toronto GTX, £159.99

I've been abusing this boot (pictured) for a good few years and it performed brilliantly on the Tour du Mont Blanc where, although the trails were excellent and the weather was warm, I was still happier in a hiking boot than a shoe – there were patches of snow, some rocky terrain and a few stream crossings. The light leather boot is Gore-Tex lined so it's waterproof; the sole gives good grip and it didn't feel uncomfortable despite the hot weather – although I can't pretend I wasn't relieved to take them off each evening.

www.meindl.co.uk

Lifeventure

Silicone Ellipse Bowl, £6.99

If you hike with adventure tour company Utracks, as I did, lunch is communal and a bowl or plate is essential for salads and puddings. The collapsible Silicone Ellipse Bowl is light, folds down nice and small and comes in a funky range of colours.

www.lifeventure.co.uk

Robens

Travel Sheet Microfibre, £19.99

I don't normally bother with a sleeping bag liner in the Alps in winter, but in summer it was useful to sleep in when the duvets or blankets provided by mountain refuges were too hot – and it's more hygienic too. Mine is made by tent company Robens, and packs down small into a stuff sack.

www.robens.de



High point:
spectacular trails
beneath Mont Blanc

LET'S GO

Want to do what Rosie did? Here's how you can...

Get there

The nearest international airport is Geneva, with a choice of airlines offering flights from various UK airports.

The trek traditionally starts and finishes in the village of Les Houches, but the start and finish point for most organised treks is Chamonix. There are plenty of transfers from Geneva airport to Chamonix; the journey is just over an hour. I used Mountain Drop-offs, who were friendly and run door-to-door service to and from your accommodation. Prices start from about £27 each way; see www.mountaindropoffs.com.

Stay there

Accommodation along the Tour du Mont Blanc ranges from camping to comfortable hotels (although for these you might have to venture quite far from the trail in some places). Utracks uses traditional mountain refuges, with dorm rooms where you'll often end up sleeping in a bed with lots of your fellow trekkers. It's all part of the experience, but earplugs and an eye mask help with a good night's sleep. All of the refuges we stayed in had showers and sold beer.

At the start of the trip I spent a night in Hotel Eden, in Les Praz just outside Chamonix (www.hoteleden-chamonix.com),

which had a terrace bar with live music. After the trip I spent the night at the traditional Hotel de la Couronne, celebrating its 150th anniversary this year, further up the valley in Argentiere. See www.hotelcouronne.com.

What to take

Prepare for all weathers. Our trip was scorching, so pack sunglasses, suncream, a sun hat and travel wash to rinse smelly trekking gear. On the other hand, July 2014 saw just eight days without rain, so pack a waterproof jacket and trousers. And warm layers, as the trek reaches over 2,500m.

Our trek was supported, so we just carried a daysack and were allowed up to 7kg of extra luggage to take for the evenings. If you're travelling with Utracks, an important addition to your daysack is a plate/bowl and spoon for the communal lunch, and have enough space in your pack to help carry a bit of food too.

Vital for the huts are earplugs and an eye mask, and I'd recommend a travel towel and sleeping bag liner too. In terms of general trekking gear, I'd suggest hiking boots over shoes as there's some rough terrain and patches of snow to cross, and trekking poles are useful for the ascents and descents. Blister plasters and basic first aid is also useful.

The trip

I joined Utracks Mont Blanc Guided Walk, which is seven days and costs from £560, including food, guide and accommodation but not flights. The trip follows two different itineraries depending on whether you go in spring and autumn (May, June and September) or summer (July and August). The company grades the trip as 'moderate to challenging' – we had some long days of walking on generally good paths, with over 900m of ascent on four of the seven days. See more at www.utracks.com.

When to go

For best chances of snow-free paths the best time to hike the Tour du Mont Blanc is early July until mid September, although many trekking operators run trips earlier than that and tailor them to the conditions. Later in September refuges will start to close, so check if you're planning to hike then.

Books and maps

The Cicerone guide *The Tour of Mont Blanc* by Kev Reynolds describes the route both clockwise and anti-clockwise. The Institut Géographique National covers the route in three 1:25,000 maps; the sheets are 3530 ET, 3531 ET and 3630 OT.



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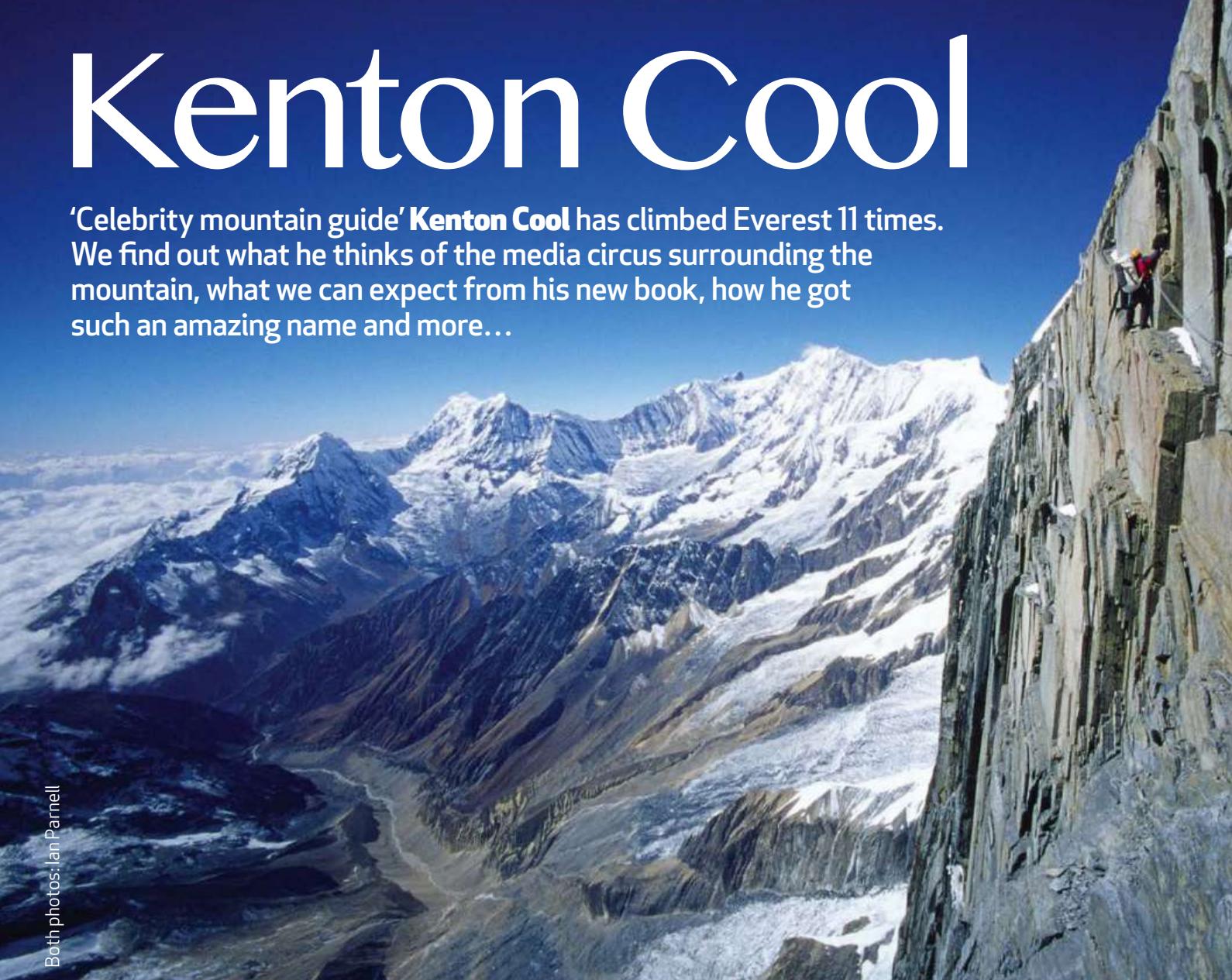
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Kenton Cool

'Celebrity mountain guide' **Kenton Cool** has climbed Everest 11 times. We find out what he thinks of the media circus surrounding the mountain, what we can expect from his new book, how he got such an amazing name and more...

Both photos: Ian Parnell



From your new book we get the impression that you were born to be a climber – you became obsessed as soon as you discovered it...

I think I have a pretty obsessive personality, it doesn't matter what I'm doing! I'm tenacious. Once something's been dangled in front of me I will move heaven and high water to achieve it.

I came into climbing relatively late; I was 17 or so. Before that I was a hockey player. I'd train six times a week and sometimes play two matches a day at the weekend – I loved it. It was the same with climbing. I loved it and I loved the community. But yes I am quite obsessive, sometimes to my detriment.

But then you had a terrible fall?

Yes: 29 June 1996, at about 1.15 in the afternoon. Not that it's etched in stone in my memory...

And that didn't inspire you to find a new obsession, away from climbing?

No. There was a moment when one of the first consultants told me I'd never walk properly again and never climb, and that just made me more determined. I'm a bit rude about that consultant in the book, but perhaps I should ring him up and say thank you, because in some strange reverse psychology way he gave me this career. Not a glittering highlight though, falling off that day!

Before you became a guide you did all sorts of jobs to fund your climbing expeditions...

I did some really horrible jobs. Like getting dressed up in a non-breathable rubber suit, with essentially breathing apparatus, to clean the insides of oil wells. I did five weeks on an oil tanker

5 things you probably didn't know about Kenton Cool...

1 He's named after a character in *The Archers*

2 He was a fanatic hockey player before he discovered climbing

3 He was once told he'd never be able to walk properly again

4 If he wasn't a guide he'd like to be a school teacher

5 He's petrified his new book is going to be crap. Find out what we think on page 30.



First ascent: a new route on Annapurna III



Top of the world: on Everest

on the equator, inside the tanks, and we'd lose so much fluid that we had to work two hours on, one hour off. But on the flip side it paid for a winter season in the Alps.

I've got mixed emotions about those days – crap jobs, but fun times with fun people. It could be the worst job known to mankind, but if the team was good, if the people that you were working with had energy, it made it bearable. That's a really important thing I learnt from those days. When you are building teams to go into the mountains you've got to bring together people who are going to enrich everybody's lives. You don't want the energy sappers, you don't want the high maintenance individuals; you want to create teams that are all about fun. The mountains are dangerous; you don't want any more stress.

'It saddens me that people think Everest is a circus. She doesn't deserve that. She deserves to be celebrated, she's beautiful'

A significant expedition seems to have been your first ascent of a new route up Annapurna III in 2003?

Yes. It was a very tough trip. There were just three of us and it took us to some pretty dark places.

Physically it was incredibly hard. We owe it to Ian Parnell – his lead high on Annapurna was mesmerising. It was one of those days when I was thinking 'please don't let it be my lead,' and he stepped up to the plate and despatched it beautifully. After that there was a bivvy where we thought John [Varco] was going to die. It's still probably the pinnacle of what I've achieved in the

Himalayas and not necessarily something I'd like to go back to, but I'm so glad we did it. It had an element of everything – dark times but amazing memories at the same time. That's one of the things that mountains give us, a strange yin and yang. They test you but they give you a sense of freedom at the same time.

I suppose 2003 represented the start of my career in a way. I was training as a mountain guide by then, and my 'celebrity guide' status came on the back of my first Everest ascent, which came on the back of this Annapurna III expedition. ►

At first you said you were never going to become a guide?

I also said I'd never write a book but I seem to have written one! I'm clearly full of crap. But yes, I said I'd never become a guide because I didn't want it to take away my enjoyment of the mountains. Then I became a guide and my enjoyment levels were just as high. Now I live in the Cotswolds and don't spend as much time in the mountains so when I go back, either working or for fun, my enjoyment levels are probably higher than they've ever been. I'd like to think I never took the mountains for granted, but over my five or six years of living in Chamonix, maybe I did. I really cherish the times I have in the mountains these days.

Do you enjoy seeing your clients do well too?

Without a doubt. I love being the facilitator of that. I like to think that if I weren't a guide I'd be a schoolteacher. I think there's a synergy between guiding and teaching – a lot of guides were once teachers. It would be fascinating to have that ability to influence the next generation. It's such an important, underrated job.

How do your wife and two children feel about you being away so often?

They call themselves the three amigos when I'm away and seem to get on quite well without me, which kind of hurts!

I do question my selfishness when I go away. It's easier to justify when it's work, because that's what daddy does for work. It's harder to justify when I go away for fun: skiing for the week or even climbing for a day. I beat myself up, thinking 'this is a day that I should have spent with the children.' But it's important to be honest with yourself. If I didn't go out and do these things I'd be a miserable person; I'd be a miserable father. Maybe I owe it to the family to go to the mountains and hopefully come back a slightly better person.

You've climbed Everest 11 times – are you a bit blasé about it now?

No. I'm lucky, I once got screamed at by [New Zealand mountaineer] Russel Brice at a party. He was trying to get me to work on the north side of Everest and I said I wasn't interested, because I liked the south side and had it 'wired.' Wired is a term climbers use meaning they've got it sorted out. Russel slammed down

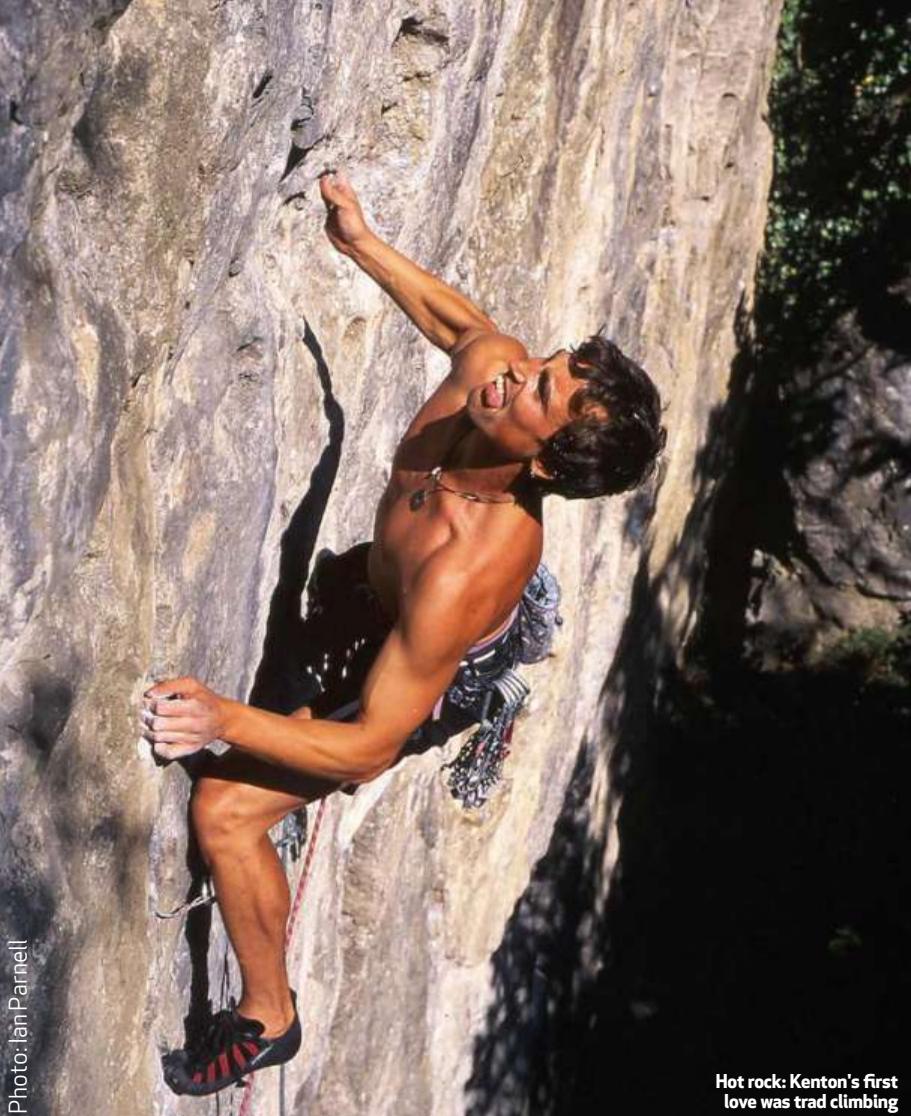


Photo: Ian Parnell

Hot rock: Kenton's first love was trad climbing

'One of the great things about mountaineering is that there are no rules. You don't have to have any experience'

his beer and shouted at me in the middle of this party, saying 'the moment you think that, the mountain will turn around and bite you on the arse.' It was embarrassing but amazing advice delivered in such the right way that I've always been on my toes.

I don't take Everest for granted. You've got to be so cautious. Anything above 8,000m is called the death zone, and it's called that for a reason – there's no safety net, no helicopter rescue – it's one of the most hostile environments on the planet. The moment you take it for granted, it's going to kill you. Each time I go I feel humble that I'm allowed to go there. I tread lightly with the utmost respect. You've got to go fully armed, and for me that's putting the hours in in the gym, or on the bike, or in the mountains, then learning your trade, being experienced, and being ready for whatever Everest may throw at you, because she's a wicked mistress at times. She's lovely, and I love going

there, but I've seen too much death in the mountains and I don't want to die in the mountains.

Your next plan is to climb the world's three highest mountains in one season. Have you been up K2 and Kangchenjunga before?

No. I was planning to be on K2 this year but I decided not to go – I don't really want to go somewhere like that twice. Then again I might fall in love with it – I said that about Everest and look how many times I've been there. I've not been to Kangchenjunga either, but I've always wanted to.

What difficulties will you face?

Difficulties? I don't know where to begin! They're all different. I know Everest very well and I know how to approach it. I've got a client for Everest too, so I'm super excited about that, he's a lovely man.

Kangchenjunga is a massive mountain

'Mountains give us a strange yin and yang. They test you but they give you a sense of freedom at the same time'



Above the clouds: on Everest's Geneva Spur

Photo: Keith Partridge

in a part of the Himalayas that is unknown to me. I'll be going with Dorje, my climbing Sherpa, who's not been there either. It's close enough to Everest to have the same weather system, but logistics are going to be quite tricky.

What's going to be the hiccup though is K2. K2 is technically harder than Everest, even though it's lower. It's also so weather and condition dependent. But it's a challenge that I'm ready for, and it's quite good because in terms of the story it leaves jeopardy until the last moment.

There's been a lot of tragedy on Everest in the last couple of years...

Yes, there has been so much bad news: the fight [between European mountaineers and Sherpas in 2013], last year's avalanche, then the earthquake. There's a lot of bad press about Everest and sometimes rightly so, but we don't hear enough about the great things. I'm hoping the book celebrates Everest a bit. Everest is brilliant. What saddens me about the mountain is that a lot of people think it's a circus, certainly in the media, and it's not like that. She doesn't

deserve that. She deserves to be celebrated, she's beautiful.

And it's still a challenge, no matter what people say – it's still a challenge to climb the bloody thing! That gets forgotten sometimes. People are brave to go there. They made the conscious decision to go there. And whether they have the experience or not, that's one of the great things about mountaineering. If you want to go to the mountains you can – walking, climbing, whatever it is – there's no hard or fast rules. You don't have to have the experience – it's sensible to, and I get upset by those who go to Everest without the experience – but if you want to go there, you can. It's not like golf, where you've got all the regulations, or tennis where you have to wear white – you can be yourself in the mountains. And that's important.

And will people stay away from Everest because of the earthquake?

They shouldn't. Now more than ever people should go back to Nepal. They need tourists, badly – it's the only industry they have. Trek to base camp, do some of the trekking peaks, go there and have a fabulous time, and by doing so you're helping the people of Nepal.

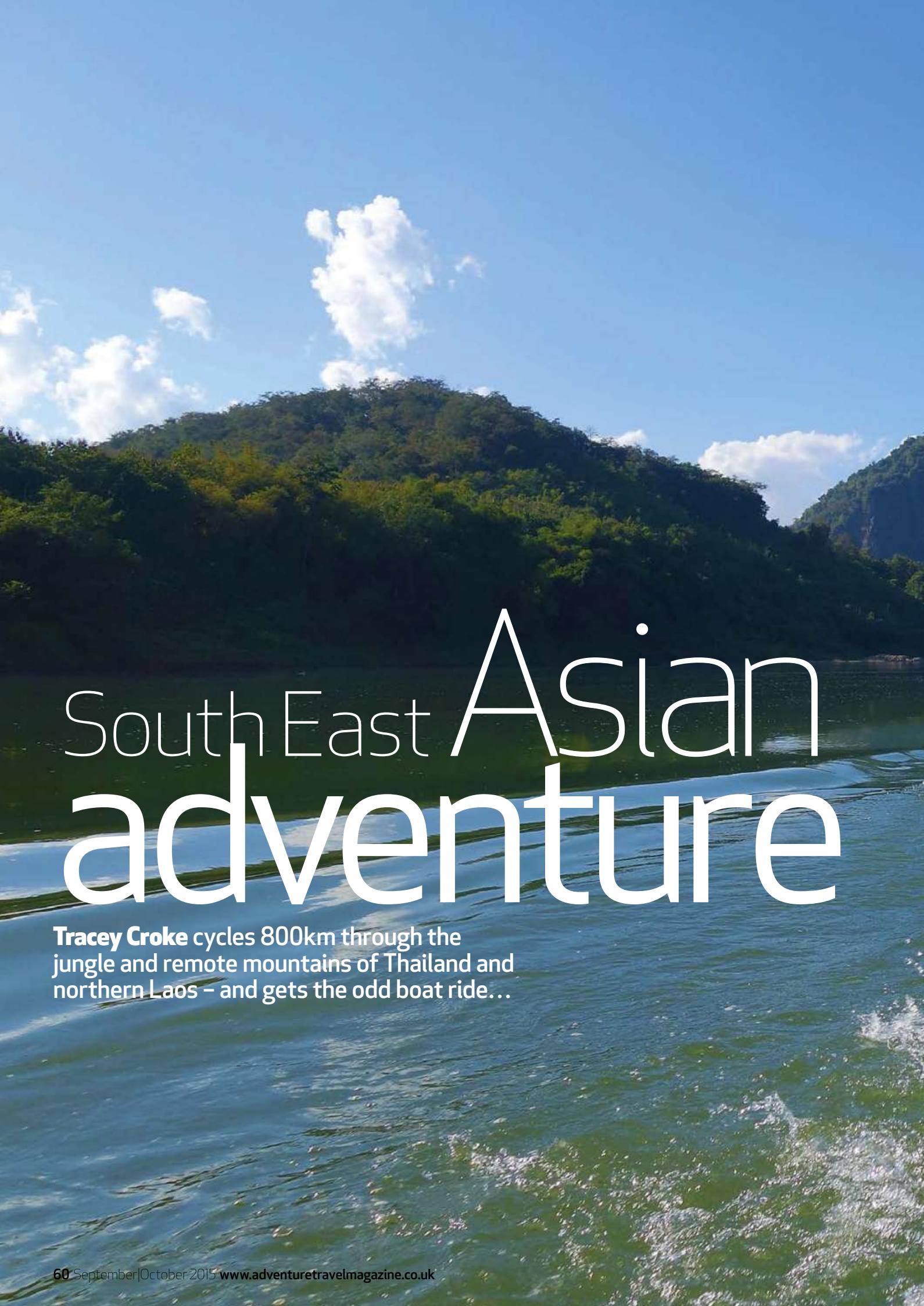
Your new book is out now – did you enjoy writing it?

Writing a book has been cathartic on many levels. It's been quite hard work and I'm petrified it's going to be crap because I'm not a writer. People say everybody's got a book inside them, but that doesn't mean everybody's a writer. I feel slightly fraudulent to writers out there by looking like I think I can write, in the same way that I wouldn't expect a writer to be able to pick up a pair of crampons and climb. It's been quite the journey, this bloody book!

Finally, your awesome name. Cool you can't choose, but where did your folks get Kenton from?

They were avid fans of *The Archers*, there was a Kenton Archer and that's where they first heard it! That's a bit embarrassing actually. When I was at school my name was a bit of a pain because other kids would take the piss. But now I'm older it's great because people remember it, it's my USP to a certain extent. **AT**

Kenton Cool's book *One Man's Everest* is out now (www.randomhouse.co.uk, £20, hardback). See our review on p30.



South East Asian adventure

Tracey Croke cycles 800km through the jungle and remote mountains of Thailand and northern Laos – and gets the odd boat ride...





Varied terrain:
roads were a mixture of
tarmac and rough gravel

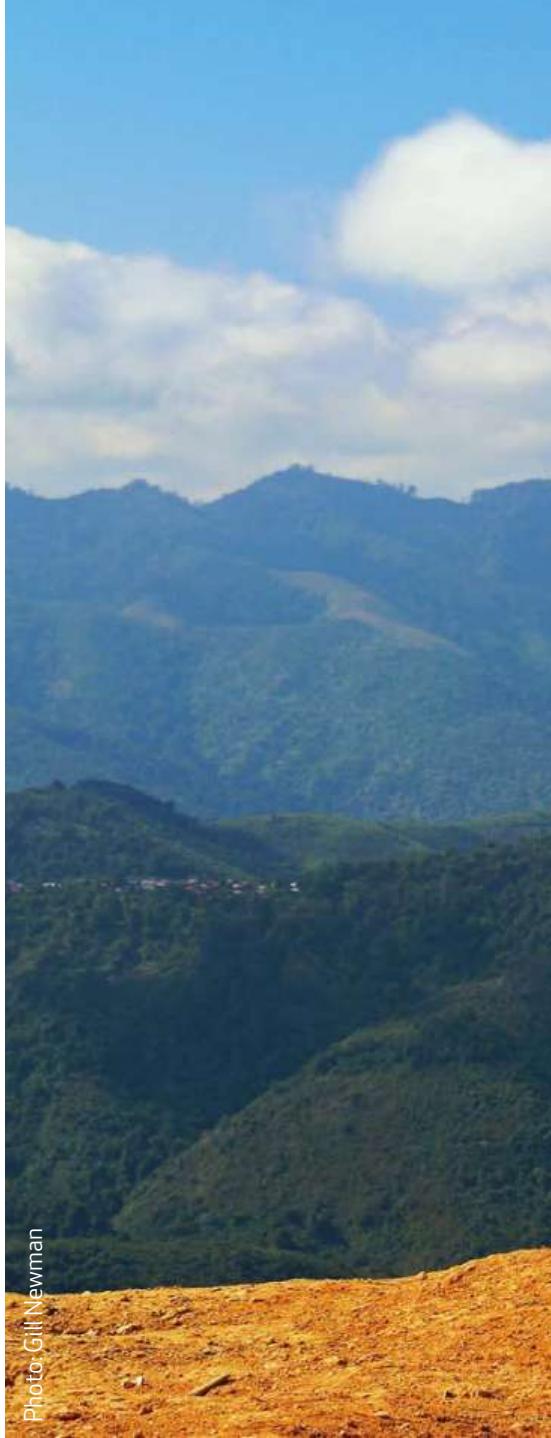


Photo: Gill Newman

“I’ll give you a special price for five,” says the stall-holder. I put on the hat and look at my fellow bike adventurers. “What do you think?” Their reply is a burst of laughter.

It’s December and the dry season is chillier than I thought in Northern Thailand. Tomorrow we head into Laos, higher into the mountains, and I don’t have time to be choosy. Chaing Rai’s famous night market is not known for beanies, so I settle for a bright blue woolly hat with earflaps, a red nose, whiskers and plastic eyes with wobbling pupils, then we head to the trip briefing.

We have a short cycle tomorrow to get to the border and cross into the

more remote and colder climes of northern Laos. Then we’ll head south to the capital Vientiane through 800km of mountain and jungle landscapes, flirting back and forth with the mighty Mekong River along the way.

Local guide Khen immediately sets the pace. “I’m the turtle, I’ll be at the back,” he says, laughing. Khen reflects the laid-back, gentle and cheery personality Laos people are known for. His pace will allow for total immersion into the hum and chatter of daily life. I can stop where I like on a whim. If I can make the daily distance in the set time, the rest is up to me.

Laos’ upper northern regions are best known for their rugged mountains and diverse ethnic cultures. As Khen lists the many highlights of the tour, he doesn’t shirk away from hard realities

Who's writing?



Tracey Croke is a travel writer and photographer who loves writing about roughy-toughy travel, off-track adventure and anything involving a bike. Her quest for a good story has seen her venture into post-conflict Afghanistan to join a pioneering expedition across the Pamir Mountains, sleep in a swag next to a croc-infested billabong and have her smalls rummaged through with the muzzle of a Kalashnikov. See more at www.traceycroke.com and follow her on twitter: @TraceyCroke.



View stop: scenery in northern Laos



the people of Laos have endured.

During the Vietnam War, the US dropped 270 million cluster bombs on Laos, which made this land-locked country of six million the most bombed in the world per capita. The operation was aimed at destroying the North Vietnamese supply routes along the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Cluster bombs open up mid-air to release hundreds of smaller 'submunitions' about the size of a cricket ball, which can saturate an area of several football fields. The National Regulatory Authority in Laos estimates that 30% failed to detonate, leaving 80 million live unexploded bombs (UXO) scattered across the landscape. Clearing them is an enormous task (only 1% to date) and a quarter of Laos' villages are still contaminated. ►

LAOS ABOUT THESE...

Six more things to do if you're travelling through Laos

1 Night market

Luang Prabang's ambient, colourful market is packed with local crafts, curiosities and devoid of hard selling.

2 Sunset balloon ride

Surrounded by karst hills, the picturesque former anything-goes party town of Vang Vieng on the Nam Song River has recalibrated in recent years to attract a more sober traveller.

3 Pak Ou caves

A sanctuary built by the Lao people in a limestone cave between the Mekong and Nam Ou rivers. More than 4,000 ancient Buddha sculptures decorate its interior.

4 Waterfall swimming

Roughly 30km outside Luang Prabang you'll find the multi-tiered Kuang Si Falls, where turquoise water tumbles over a series of limestone terraces and collects in pools surrounded by lush greenery.

5 Picnic cruise

Ang Nam Ngum Reservoir is a 250-square-kilometre expanse of water with islands, secluded beaches, swimming spots and floating restaurants serving fresh seafood dishes.

6 COPE visitor centre

Learn about the unexploded bombs (UXO) problem in Laos and COPE's work providing rehabilitation services for people affected by UXOs. More at www.copelaos.org.

While Khen reassures us that the mix of tarmac and unsealed roads we will take are well-travelled and safe, the local farmers working their small fields face the daily risk of losing a limb or their lives from the impact of their hoe or by simply lighting a fire. Forty percent of the victims are children who mistake the small bombs for toys.

Redspokes, the adventure company I'm travelling with, is committed to ethical cycling and supports communities through its Laotian Village Community Fund (www.lvcf.co.uk), a charity established by Redspokes' founder Dermot Macward and a group of cyclists.

Dermot and his team have been working with Khen and several villages



in northern Laos for over 10 years.

"All the projects have been completed at minimal cost, with community involvement and without payments to a middle-man," explains Khen. Projects include bringing clean running water to villages, building a school and supporting UXO survivors.

My heart beats a little faster when I hear we'll visit projects to see the impact of their work. I already sense that South East Asia's poorest country has many rich experiences to offer.

The next morning, after a nippy cycle to Chiang Kong, we board the houseboat home of Mrs Vieng Kham. She welcomes us and our bikes into her boat of polished dark wood, comfy seats and a bright green metal roof.

As we set off up the river, Mrs Vieng Kham rustles up a feast on her tiny stove. We observe life on the river through the open sides of the boat, and when the chill hits us, she wraps us up in bright pink Hello Kitty blankets.

Six hours later we dock in Laos at Pak Beng, and as we prepare our bikes for the following day, we watch the sun dip and glimmer across the river. It soon sinks out of sight and the flowing soul of South East Asia bids us goodnight.

Our time in Laos coincides with Hmong New Year celebrations – a religious and cultural festival to acknowledge the end of the harvest and the start of a new year. The Hmong have maintained their own language and customs, which have been passed down



Another one bites the...
Laos' dusty roads

'The US dropped 270 million cluster bombs on Laos during the Vietnam War, which made the country the most bombed in the world per capita'

the generations through ceremonies, textiles and art.

The next day in the mountains, I'm constantly distracted by elaborately embroidered and colourful dress unique to each village we pass through, and I can't resist the invitation to join in roadside ball games with giggling girls.

In the remote village of Ban Nalay, we stay in a homestay with the families of elders. First the village Shaman wants to bless us to protect us from accidents caused by negative karma.

We sit cross-legged in a circle around a mini temple of fragrant flowers. "Lean in," the village elder urges. We squeeze our hands tightly together and push them forward. My thighs thought they had clocked off for the night so my

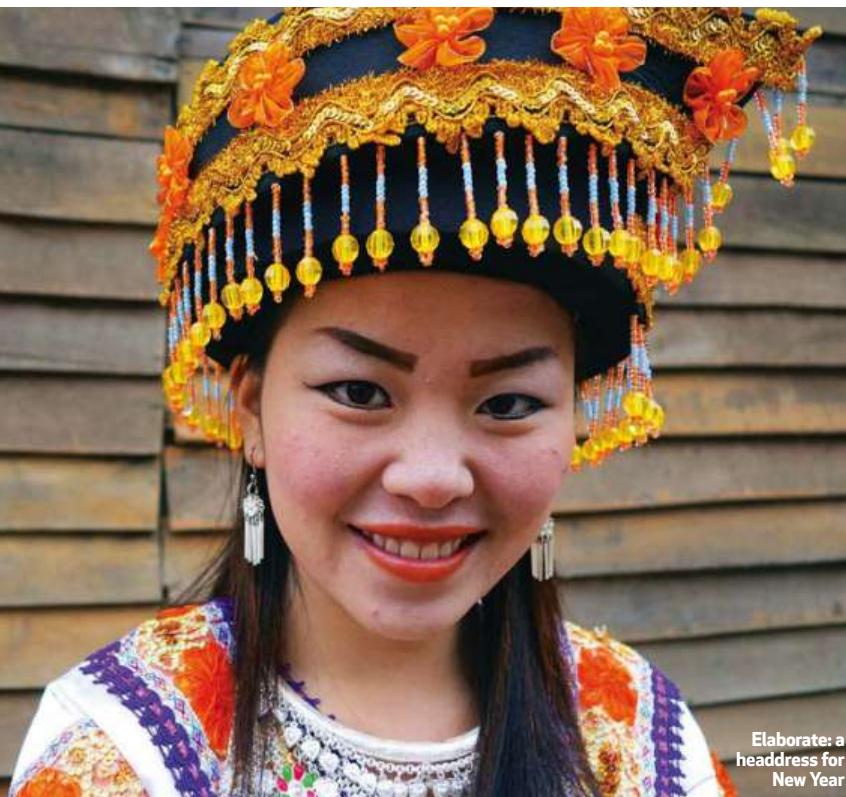
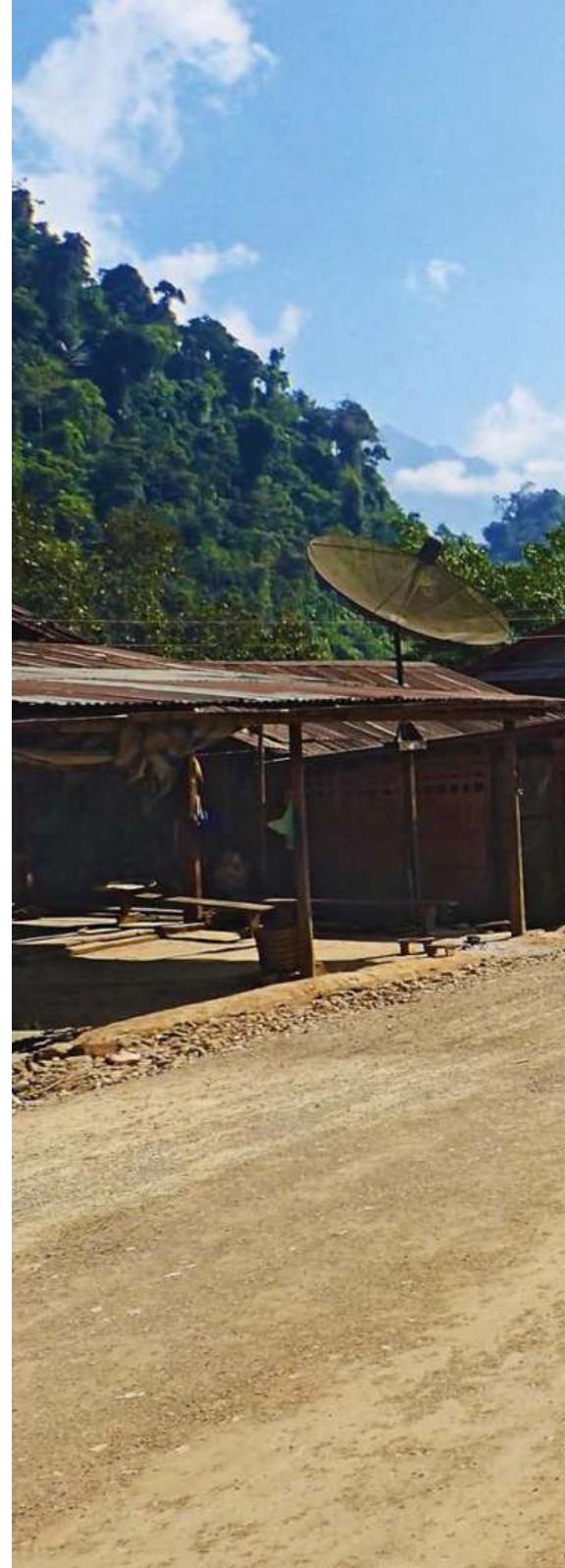
muscles are groaning. Soon the chants and cheers of the villagers take over and our grimaces turn to wide grins.

I'm invited to stay in the spacious stilted wooden home of Mr and Mrs Myankal. With no common language, we manage to get on famously with the help of expressions, gestures and a small tipple of Lao Lao, a strong locally made rice wine, usually laced with something that flies or slithers, in this case giant wasps. Although the intact corpses stick in the neck of the bottle, the liquor still stings my throat and yet leaves a strangely comforting sweet, mildly rotting-leaf-like infusion on my palate.

My bed has been made up in their living area. Fresh sheets lie on a thick padded mat under a pile of ➤



Peepo!



Elaborate: a headdress for New Year

multicoloured blankets topped with a bright magenta mosquito net. I go to sleep with the decaying taste of wasp whisky on my lips and wake up to a warm fire and fried eggs with yolks richer than the rising sun cooked by Mrs Myankal's son.

Studies show that two secrets to happiness are leading an active life and giving back. Today we get the opportunity to do both when we visit a village school supported by Redspokes, where we find the roof is in need of repair and classes are continually disrupted in the rainy season. We get to see the work cyclists before us have

funded, such as adding toilets and leveling a playing field in the hilly site. My funny-faced quirky hat fits in perfectly with the little ones.

Many Laos people can't afford the luxury of choosing their meat, and in the roadside markets it's not unusual to see moles, bats and forest cats on offer. I catch a waft of sweet meat sizzling on a stick at the side of the road. "The rats are especially good this time of year after fattening themselves up in the cornfields," shouts Khen, bursting into laughter behind me.

"I'll take your word for it," I shout back, deciding to wait for lunch

'Lao Lao is a strong locally made rice wine, usually laced with something that flies or slithers, in this case giant wasps'



Village life: leaving the limestone peaks behind

prepared by the support team, which is usually a tasty plate of mildly spiced stir-fried fresh vegetables and rice with protein I'm more accustomed to (such as chicken, fish or pork) or baguettes stuffed with tuna and salad.

As we pedal further south we hit the steamy heat of the lush lowlands. We have regular stops to fill up our water bottles and quench our thirst on sweet, juicy pineapple. The roads get busier, particularly with excited children on bikes who travel long distances to school and love to race us. It's clear in Laos that a bike is more than a hobby – it's the route to an education.

We take a rest day in the World Heritage town of Luang Prabang, described by UNESCO as the 'best-preserved city in Southeast Asia.' After lazing around for the day I head out to enjoy the town's cuisine. At first I'm tempted by the world fares offered from menus pinned to pretty French-influenced buildings. But my nose insists I venture down a narrow windy ramshackle street where I find a food market, and trade my pasta craving for steamed dumplings bursting with juicy vegetables, ginger and mild chilli.

A quick Google brings up the top things to do in Luang Prabang.

With aching legs I wasn't in the best condition to clamber up hundreds of steps, but I do to see the 'best sunset around,' only to find the view is blocked by hundreds of outstretched hands holding smartphones. I can't wait for the morning to get my sore butt back in the saddle and return to my rolling flow of uninterrupted views.

We reach the capital Vientiane and take our final bike photo under the iconic Patuxai Victory Monument, built to mark Laos's resilience and independence – a fitting end to our enlightening journey. My eyes are gritty, my face is slightly burnt and puffy with ➤

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Colourful: one of the many Buddhist temples

fatigue. I'm keen to stand under a cool soothing shower, but first there is one more place we're all keen to visit.

Mr Beng has agreed to meet me in the COPE (Cooperative Orthotic and Prosthetic Enterprise) visitor centre. COPE is a not-for-profit organisation that provides prosthetics and rehabilitation services to UXO survivors. Mr Beng sits, pulls his left leg in and nervously begins to tell his story.

Three years ago, at the age of 21, Mr Beng was digging up crops in his family field. He doesn't remember anything else until he was on the back of his friend's motorbike. His friend took him to a clinic where they saved his life but couldn't save his leg. "I thought my

life was over," he told me through an interpreter. "I thought I would never be able to support a wife and a family."

Mr Beng's nerves dissipate when he tells me how he learned of COPE through a friend. Now rehabilitated with a prosthetic leg made to fit him, he doesn't need to describe the difference COPE has made to his life. When he speaks of his wife and baby daughter, the joy in his eyes completes his story.

Our group sits down to share our final beer. This normally upbeat bunch is quiet. I'm feeling a tinge of melancholy. Most of us came together as strangers, we are leaving as friends and I wonder what each one of us is thinking about. It could be the laughs, the characters

we've met or the hills we've raced up against Strava. I sense we are all grateful to be resting our aching and weary legs.

The Chiang Rai to Vientiane tour is a balance of challenging cycling and cultural immersion. It's a trip for those interested in learning about the history and politics of Laos. It's an emotive journey where you are free to enjoy a connection with the landscape and people in a way that can only be experienced on a bike. **AT**

The author donated the fee for this article to COPE (www.copelaos.org) and also the Redspokes LVCF Fund to contribute to a new roof for the school in Ban Nalay. See www.lvcf.co.uk.



Wow: a sunset balloon ride over the Nam Song River

LET'S GO

Want to do what Tracey did? Here's how you can...

The tour

I joined Redspokes Cycling Adventure Tours' 14-day Laos and Thailand Lost in Time trip, which costs from £1,295 (not including flights). See www.redspokes.co.uk.

How to get there

Flights from the UK direct to Bangkok include BA, Thai Air, Emirates and Etihad. Thai Airways and Bangkok Airways fly from Bangkok to Chiang Rai for about £50, and from Vientiane (the finish point) to Bangkok, which is about £90. Extra charges may apply if you are bringing your own bike.

Where to stay

We stayed in guesthouse and hotel accommodation, chosen on the basis of comfort rather than luxury. The trip price is based on sharing a twin room; single rooms are sometimes available at extra cost.

Visas

British passport holders can enter Thailand for 30 days without a visa. Your passport should be valid for a minimum of six months from the date of entry into Thailand. A 15-day visa is required for Laos, which is arranged by Redspokes on arrival in Laos. The cost is approximately US\$40.

Bikes

The route is a mixture of tarmac and rough gravel roads. You can bring your own bike or hire a hard-tail mountain bike from Redspokes for £150 extra. If you bring your own bike, ensure it is in good working order before you leave – maybe have it professionally serviced. Redspokes advises that you check all wheel spokes, grease bearings, check your brakes/gears cable, tighten all nuts and bolts, check the chain, the quick release clamps and the tyres, put in new inner tubes and check the wheel rims are not worn.

What to take

I travelled during the dry season (October to late April), which has minimal chances of rain. Take cycling gear and clothes for 14 days and daytime temperatures of up to 30°C and down to 5°C in the mountainous areas.

Leaders carry a good tool kit and will help to fix any bike problems, but there is no guarantee that there will be equipment for all repairs. If you bring your own bike, it's essential to have the spares specific to your bike. A bus transferred our main baggage from each overnight stop to the next; the additional support vehicle stopped often. All we needed to carry with us was water, extra clothing, valuables and a camera.

Food

Laos food is mildly spiced and generally consists of tasty meat/fish dishes with vegetables, rice and noodles. The support team prepares breakfast and lunch designed for long days of cycling, and there are several snack stops during the day. Dinner is prepared by the team or at a restaurant.

Vaccinations

Seek medical advice at least six weeks before travelling. Redspokes recommends vaccinations against typhoid, polio and hepatitis A, and a tetanus injection is essential.

Money matters

The currency in Thailand is baht. In Laos, the majority of transactions will be in kip. Notes come in denominations of 500, 1000, 2000, 5000, 10,000, 20,000, 50,000 and 100,000 kip. Small vendors, especially in rural areas, will struggle to change 100,000K notes. For larger transactions the US dollar and baht are favoured.

Medical and insurance

Insurance policies should cover any potential risks involved in a mountain cycling holiday. It's also advisable to carry your own first aid kit while cycling.

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Cool campsites

James Warner-Smith, co-author of *Cool Camping Europe*, highlights five of the best camping hotspots in Europe

1 CAMPING MENINA, SLOVENIA

In a wooded section of Slovenia's Upper Savinja Valley, Camping Menina has a natural lake that's perfect for swimming. Canoes, bikes and climbing gear accompany most tents at the campsite, because as well as the River Savinja, the upper valley boasts the fast-flowing Dreta, making rafting and kayaking hugely popular. Staff have a spontaneous approach to organising activities, but look out for canyoning trips in the mountains, or go trekking and mountain biking yourselves, with maps available onsite. www.campingmenina.com



Slovenian shade



2 PANORAMA CAMPING, SONNENBERG, AUSTRIA

Panorama Sonnenberg is a charming campsite with site-wide wi-fi, a cosy library and a bakery just around the corner. Its real winning feature, though, are the views. Ringed by peaks, every direction draws your attention and the site has easy access to five magnificent valleys. Though challenging, almost every neighbouring peak can be summited without technical equipment, like the horn-shaped Vorarlberg, the Zimba Massif (a one or two-day hike), and the Lünersee, a crater lake nearly 2,000m above sea level. The nearby town of Bludenz is a hive of hikers, bikers, skiers and snowboarders.

www.camping-sonnenberg.com

3 CAMPING AROLLA, SWITZERLAND



Swiss bliss

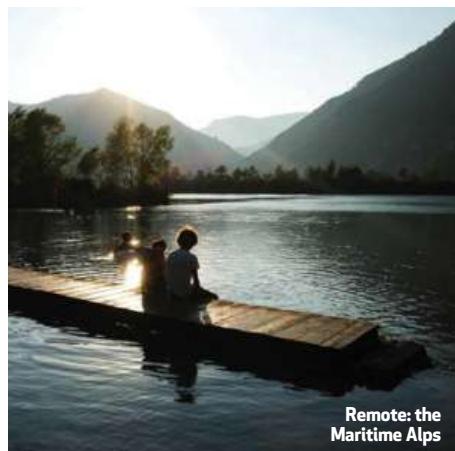
Just shy of 2,000m, Arolla is a terraced campsite with a remote, traditional feel, but the facilities are immaculate. Pitch on the shoulder of the hill for the best views towards Mont Collon and the Pigne d'Arolla, both of which host technical climbs. There are also plenty of hikes, including multi-day routes like Chamonix to Zermatt, and the picturesque Lac Bleu – a short walk that meanders through forests and meadows to a crystal-clear lake.

www.camping-arolla.com

4 CAMPING DU BREC, FRANCE

With a lakeside bar and shady pitches, Camping du Brec, in the Maritime Alps in France's remote south east, is a quietly humming hub for families and outdoorsy-types. Swimming, fishing and canoeing make the lake an obvious focal point but, beyond the campsite, there's plenty to discover: like cycling the Col de la Bonette – Europe's highest road and the bane of the world's greatest cyclists during the Tour de France.

www.camping-dubrec.com



Remote: the Maritime Alps

GET THE BOOK

The second edition of *Cool Camping Europe* is out now, available from www.coolcamping.co.uk and priced at £18.95.





Perfect pitch:
Austrian camping

Just an amble from
the campsite...



5 QUINTA DOS CARRIÇOS, PORTUGAL

Far enough from overdeveloped tourist ports but within reach of lively beach bars, Quinta dos Carriços is a walled, Eden-like campsite. The owners have planted seeds and cuttings from their travels, creating botanical mayhem akin to an over-grown garden centre. But the camping plots are well kept and spacious and you're guaranteed some shade, a blessing under the Portuguese sun. When you venture out, take a short amble to the nearby beach for surfing and boat rental or head further afield to the charming lighthouse at Cabo de São Vicente in the south-westerly tip of Europe. www.quintadoscarricos.com

CAMPING KIT

Great kit for your next camping adventure

Hilleberg

Anjan 2 | £575

www.hilleberg.com

The Anjan 2 is an extremely light two-man tent – just 1.8kg – designed for three-season trekking and cycle touring. We tested it in 24 hours of torrential rain, and not only did it keep us and our kit bone-dry, but the tent itself took no time to dry out afterwards. It's also easy to pitch, there's space inside to sit up and a porch for your gear. Hilleberg tents always cost a lot, but they're always worth it – exquisitely made and perfect for the job.

Bridgedale

Flurry hat | £19

www.bridgedale.com

Best known for its socks, Bridgedale has now branched out into hats – great news, because a woolly hat is a camping essential no matter how warm you think the weather is. The Flurry is in the midweight collection, made from a mixture of merino wool and technical fibres to offer warmth and comfort, with a fleece earband too. There are some lovely colours and designs in the collection.



Vango

Inspire 600 | £1,100

www.vango.co.uk

If you're camping from the car there's no need to travel light so why not go for stability, space and a touch of luxury? Vango's Inspire 600 tent is part of the AirBeam range, using air rather than poles, so it's easy to pitch – just pump it up. There's also tons of space and storage options, and we recommend getting an Inspire 600 Carpet (£90) too, to make it even more divine.



Sea to Summit

X-Pot range | From £36

www.seatosummit.com

Sea to Summit's X-Pot range of pots and a kettle are collapsible, making them easy to pack, but they have a hard anodised aluminium base so you can still cook on them. Utter genius.



Gelert

Moon Chair | £64.99

www.gelert.com

A comfy yet easy-to-carry circular seat with lots of padding. Perfect for sitting down with a beer in after a day outside.





Extreme camping



Charlie Hopkinson, MD of overlanding tour operator Dragoman, tells us his five most adventurous camping experiences. See www.dragoman.com

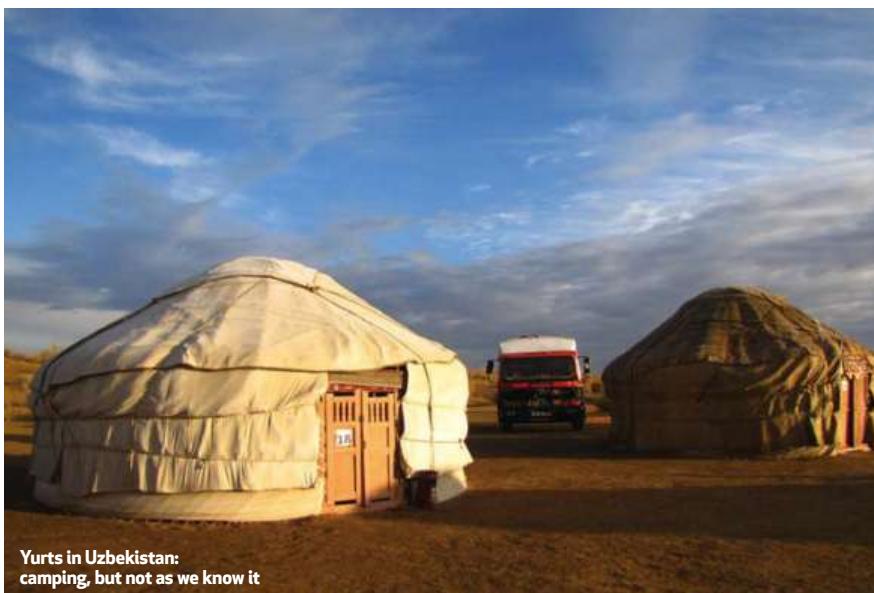
1 MONGOLIA

While Mongolia has come a long way since the days of Chinggis Khan, its landscape, typified by the Gobi desert, glistening lakes and snow-capped mountains, make this adventurous country an outdoor lover's dream. Mongolia is one of the last unspoilt travel destinations of the world, where nomadic herders still tend to their flocks among vast grasslands, gers remain the accommodation of choice and it's still possible to travel for days without meeting another human being, let alone fellow western travellers. Dragoman's 21-day Ulaan Bataar to Ulaan Bataar trip is 90% camping, both in traditional yurts and wild camping in western-style tents.



2 UZBEKISTAN AND KYRGYZSTAN

Kyrgyzstan's mountain scenery will take your breath away, as might a glimpse of the odd black bear nearby, but you have to be quick: the country's high mountain passes are only open for a few summer months. Travelling into Central Asia's mountainous hinterland takes you far from the beaten track, and you'll unzip your flysheet to some of the most dramatic scenery on the planet. Dragoman's 16-day Tashkent to Bishkek trip is 60% camping, including some yurts. There's three nights of wild camping in Kyrgyzstan National Park, trekking into the stunning Jeti-Oghuz Gorge on the edge of the Tian Shan Mountains, and you can watch a game of *buzkashi*, or polo with a goat instead of a ball, too.



Yurts in Uzbekistan:
camping, but not as we know it



Remote China

3 CHINA

Camping in China can be difficult, but we manage it in the country's wild west on this 'camping lite' trip (staying in guesthouses in the more built up central China). Our 22-day Kashgar to Xi'an route skirts the isolated Taklamakan Desert, reaching the western end of the Great Wall, 3,000 miles from Beijing. Then the road climbs to the Tibetan Plateau before descending to Xi'an, home of the Terracotta Warriors.



Unspoilt destination:
Mongolia's vast grasslands

4 THE US AND CANADA

One of the planet's best road trips, camping en route? Oh yeah! A road trip along Alaska and the western side of Canada is packed with National Parks (Denali, Jasper and Banff to name but a few) and a dream for outdoor enthusiasts. Our 24-day Anchorage to Banff trip is 90% camping.



Stunning Denali National Park



Friendly visitor

5 KENYA AND TANZANIA

See elephants strolling through camp at the Ngorongoro Crater, go to sleep to the sound of the Serengeti and camp on the slopes of snow-capped Kilimanjaro on one of the best trips in Africa. Dragoman's 14-day Nairobi to Dar es Salaam route includes jeep safaris and five days of relaxation, first on the white beaches south of Dar, then on the idyllic spice island of Zanzibar.

PERFECT CAMP SPOTS

What's the best place you've ever camped? That's what we asked our friends and followers... Tell us yours on Facebook or Twitter (@rosieATmag, @ATmagOnline)

@WetsuitRevivalP Kobarid, Slovenia on kayaking trip last year, waking up to birds hunting for worms outside tent & roar of water

@In_The_Saddle Got to be in #Morocco next to a sandy beach each night on one of our trail rides #magica

@A_lifeoutdoors that's too hard a question! So many great #camping spots to choose from.....#exmoor in the UK has to be my favourite though

Clara McAllister (via Facebook) Monument Valley, Utah. The night sky blew my mind.

Howard Compton (via Facebook) I camped at the edge of a glacier in Svalbard for a month. That was spectacular and incredible scenery. It's never been beaten despite the 100s of nights in a tent. **AT**

Canadian *serenity*

Canoe is the most peaceful way to explore Canada's little-known Kejimkujik National Park in Nova Scotia, says **Fran McElhone**. But expect aching arms

Photo: Parks Canada/D Wilson





All aboard: Fran steering across George Lake



Idyllic: Kejimkujik National Park

I'm being watched. I can feel eyes on me as I balance on a small rock, dipping the plates from breakfast into the lake. But glancing over my shoulder both into the woods and along the shore, I can't see anyone. Then I catch sight of a shiny, egg-sized head poking out of the water a couple of metres away. Immediately the tiny glistening dome disappears, before popping back up even closer. Fairly soon this inquisitive native is basking in the sun on a protruding log. Then there are two palm-sized creatures enjoying the sunshine, and apparently our company as well.

Painted turtles are just one of the delights hiding within the boundaries of Kejimkujik National Park, a fond Keji for short, the ancestral home of

the Mi'kmaq Indians. It's a place filled with the sound of nature, and of silence, embarrassing those pricey mind-body-soul retreats.

Keji delivers serenity in spades, you can't escape her. When you wake up, reach for the tent zip, poke your head out into the starkly fresh morning and breathe in the scent of the pine forest with its 300-year-old trees, serenity is there. When you wander down to the fringes of one of a mass of lakes twinkling in the morning sun, she will be there. Last thing at night, while you gaze up at a trillion stars before padding back by torchlight through the trees, serenity will be there. And even when you're on the move, lifting your dripping paddle from the liquid mirror you're gliding over, letting the breeze sweep you to where it took its

Who's writing?



Fran McElhone is a South West-based journalist specialising in investigative reporting and finding inspirational people to interview. The 34-year-old's passion for adventure travel has taken her snowboarding in the Kashmiri Himalayas, Finnish Lapland, Morocco's Atlas Mountains and New Zealand. She also lived in Whistler, Canada, for two years. When she's not writing or snowboarding, she's either trail running, mountain biking, stand-up paddle boarding, riding around on her Suzuki Van Van or looking after her son Woody.



former inhabitants, the First Nations indigenous to Canada's Maritime provinces so many decades before – you can feel serenity's embrace.

In the south of the Maritime province of Nova Scotia on Canada's eastern wing, Keji is a little-known pocket of this vast country, but it is pure Canada and only a five-or-so hour flight from the UK. Its 156-square-mile wilderness is crammed with a mélange of dense Arcadian forests, red maple floodplains, pine trees and deep lakes – the bigger ones a touch unpredictable, the smaller pools serene and friendly, each with its own profile and personality. And this is an accessible wilderness, traversable by canoe or along hiking trails in summer and on cross country skis or snowshoes in winter.

We have three days and two nights ➤



MORE TO DO IN NOVA SCOTIA

On the southeastern tip of Canada, Nova Scotia is the country's second smallest province but it's packed with fun. Here are more suggestions of how to spend your time there...

1 Rent surf boards at Lawrencetown Beach in the Eastern Shore region, or simply enjoy the area's intriguing scenery.

2 Go for a road trip around Cape Breton's scenic roadway the Cabot Trail. Camp or stay in motels, hike the trails and hop on a whale-watching trip to glimpse humpbacks.

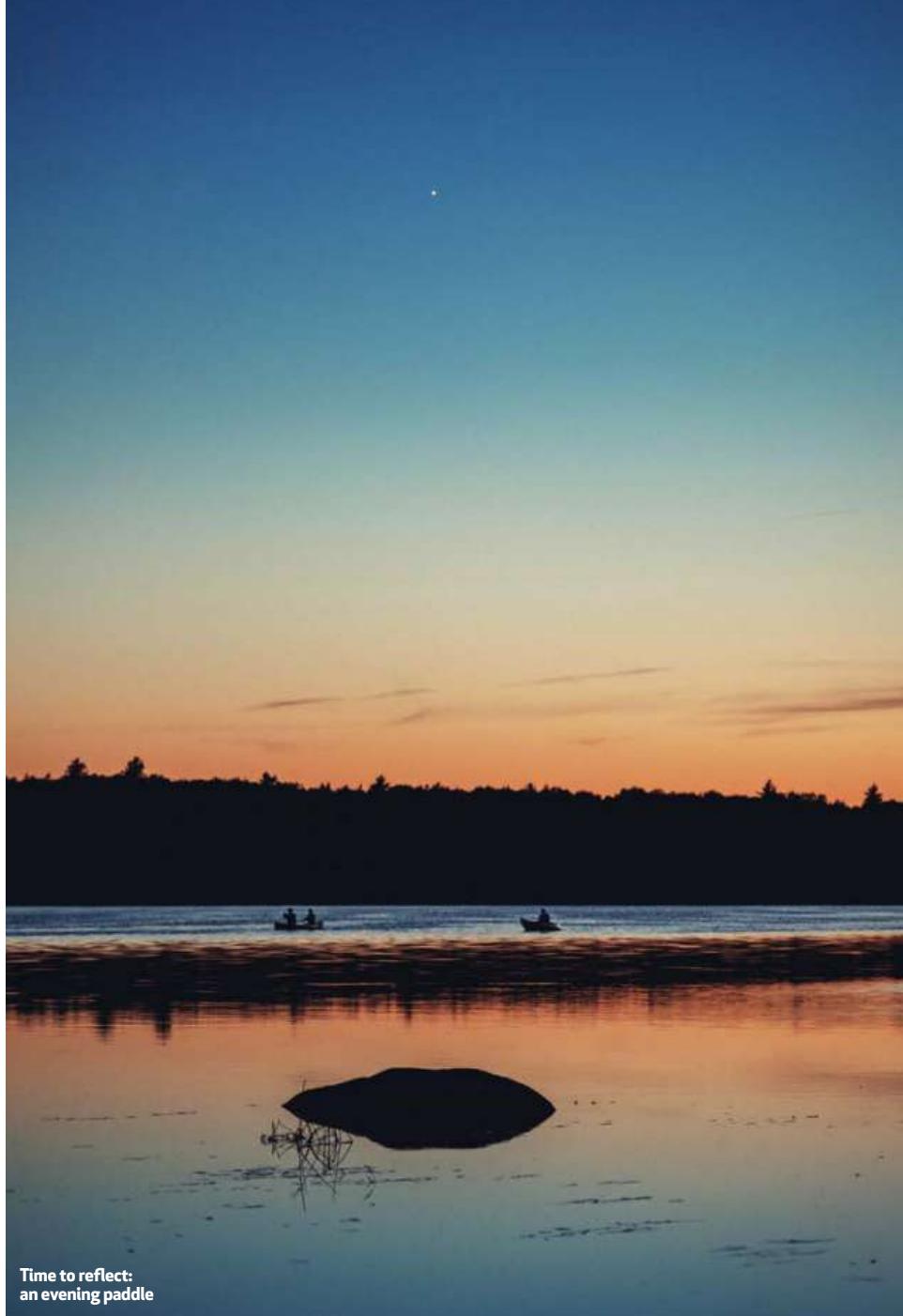
3 In winter, go cross country skiing, skiing or snowboarding at Ski Martock near Windsor, Ski Wentworth in the Wentworth Valley or Ben Eoin at Cape Breton.

4 In the province's capital, Halifax, try skateboarding, or watch the skaters in action, at Halifax Commons skate park. Then go for sushi at B-well Sushi and Cafe and cheesecake at Sweet Hereafter on nearby Quinpool Road.

5 Nova Scotia, in its rugged entirety, is beautiful, and hiring a car and going on a road trip is the best way of seeing the province. Head along the South Shore region via Peggy's Cove where you can clamber over the rocks and bask in the sunshine looking out over the Atlantic. Or head up towards Annapolis Valley and the remote Scots Bay and feel like you are miles from anywhere and anyone.

6 Delve into the Halifax art, music and foodie scene. Restaurants serve up delicious locally caught seafood, including Digby scallops and Nova Scotia lobster. There are plenty of galleries and music venues, plus a host of festivals, from the Halifax International Busker Festival to the Halifax Tall Ships Festival and the Royal Nova Scotia International Tattoo.

7 For centuries, Nova Scotia has been home to the First Nations Mi'kmaq people, long before European colonists arrived in the 17th century. Explore the province's tumultuous past by visiting the Halifax Citadel, the fortified summit of Citadel Hill, established by British settlers in 1749 to fend off their French rivals.



Time to reflect:
an evening paddle

to take in this enigmatic landscape. Ahead of our trip, we arm ourselves with a map of the park and work out where we want to camp. Each campsite is stocked up with pre-chopped firewood, and has a designated fire pit, a picnic table, a toilet and a bear cache (black bears are common but they choose to avoid people rather than seek them out). All this effort is so that visitors can leave the park undisturbed, carrying out anything they bought in. Protected and governed by Parks Canada, you also have to register and buy a permit at the office at the park boundary, where you'll be presented with a list of dos and don'ts.

When planning a paddling trip in Keji, it's essential to consider the scale of the lakes you're planning to take on. Hugging the shoreline helps,

but sometimes submerged rocks, shallow areas and thick plant life make it impossible to cling to the edge all the time. Another crucial factor are the portages, which can range from a couple of hundred meters to a shoulder-burning kilometre – beastly with all your kit and swarms of midges showering you with attention. And in addition to making sure you've packed enough provisions, including fresh water, also take water purification tablets – just in case your water container leaks, as ours did...

After setting off from the in-laws in Dartmouth, the other side of Nova Scotia's capital Halifax, first thing one sunny July morning, we arrive at Jake's Landing to pick up our reserved stead for the next three days. You can also rent kayaks, double kayaks, bikes and rowing boats.



Ahoy: friendly faces on the river

Half way up the long stretch of Kejimkujik Lake, we are faced with a choice – leave the car here and add on an extra kilometre of paddling, pay a little extra for a shuttle to the Eel Weir, or tie our canoe to the roof rack and drive it down ourselves. We opt for the latter and set off late morning across George Lake past islets of pines, bobbing past Hemlock Island and into Minard Bay, in the south westerly corner of the lake.

The national park's heritage is rooted in the Mi'kmaq Indians who used the waterways to cut across the province between the Bay of Fundy and the Atlantic. They named its biggest lake Kejimkujik, meaning 'tired muscles.' It doesn't take us long to find out why – when the wind whips up, crossing this giant is muscle-achingly tough.

We get into a steady rhythm with

'Keji is a little known pocket of this vast country, but it is pure Canada and only a five-or-so hour flight from the UK'

little respite for almost an hour. A highlight is spotting the loon – an elusive aquatic bird. We make a mental note to report its whereabouts to park staff on our return.

As we approach the edge of Norway Island and shimmy into the bay, we pass campsites 18 and 19 and see families enjoying lolling in the heat of the day. We wonder if we had been unnecessarily ambitious resolving

to cross three lakes and battle four portages before our first resting spot.

Portage number one is half a kilometre and we don't hang about hoiking the canoe over our heads and striding out into the glade, before hiking back for the rest of the gear and the paddles. North Cranberry Lake and Puzzle Lake, separated, mercifully, by a teeny tiny portage, are far more calming and grant us a little respite from Keji's gusty fringes.

Coblielle Lake, after portage number three, is up next. This lake merges into Mountain Lake, which we will cross on our last day. We have to dissect the lake defiantly across its middle – hugging the shore would be futile because of its higgledy-piggledyness – so, now late afternoon, we confront it head on. Navigating the expanse is easy enough, keeping the islets to our right ➤



Hard going: blustery Peskowesk lake

'This is an accessible wilderness, traversable by canoe or hiking trails in summer, and by cross country skis or snow shoes in winter'

and heading straight ahead, and then keeping an eye on the shoreline on our left, hooking round the nose into a corner hidden until now, ready for the final portage of the day.

Here fatigue really sets in, our entire bodies aching from several hours of non-stop paddling and portaging. At the end of our last portage it's just a short paddle across to our campsite on a small island. All the campsites and portages are marked but due to the angle of the sign at this one, we end up circling the island twice before finally spotting it. Exhausted, but pleased to have kept to my militant approach of no breaks, we set up camp, make a fire, get the pasta on the boil, crack open a can of Keith's IPA and take stock.

I wander off to the other side of the island and crouch down in the last ray

of the day, just serenity and me, nothing to think about other than the beauty that I am an insignificant dot in.

The next morning, post turtle bonding session and in no rush with only a short way to our next camp, we do a side trip. Leaving all our kit at base, we paddle over to the mainland before setting off into the warm shadows of the forest for an excursion to peer at Little Peskowesk Lake.

Once back at camp and out of the heat of the forest, we notice that the wind has picked up, just in time for our kilometre or so paddle to campsite 31. This is harder going than we expected and takes far longer than anticipated. We head over to the right hand side of the lake and cling as near to the shoreline as we can, taking a break in a shallower enclave part way along.

As we round the corner into the inlet where our campsite is nestled, the mood of the lake flips. In complete calm, we lift our paddles and let the wind blow us on to a tiny beach where we swim and sunbathe until dusk.

On day three, after a wake up portage, we enter Mountain Lake in a marshy crook where a beaver plays hide and seek with us. This lake is exquisite. I expect everyone has their favourite and this one is mine, perfectly still and utterly seducing – though not quite seductive enough to take away the pain in our shoulders from the longest portage in the park – almost a kilometre back to Minard Bay and then our final paddle back across the familiar waters of George Lake to the Eel Weir.

Planning and equipment aside, the best advice I have is not clever or profound. It's simply to do as we did: save yourself a Keith's IPA until the very end, then toast your resolve, your aching limbs, the unspoilt beauty of this sacred wilderness and your new friend serenity. **AT**



'We lift our paddles and let the wind blow us on to a tiny beach where we swim and sunbathe until dusk'

Dry land: reaching the first night's campsite



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Sparkling: serene
Kejimkujik National Park



LET'S GO

Want to do what Fran did? Here's how you can...

Get there

We flew with Canadian Affair (www.canadianaffair.com), which has return flights from London Gatwick to Halifax from £445. Outbound flights leave on Tuesdays and Thursdays and inbound flights operate on Mondays and Wednesdays from June to October. Canadian Affair also offers advance car hire options from £29 per day.

Kejimkujik National Park is easily accessed from Highway 8. It's about 175km from Halifax (about 2.5 hours' drive) or 200km from the airport.

Visiting the park

A designated National Historic Site of Canada, 80% of Kejimkujik National Park is only accessible by walking trails or canoe. There are two parts to the park. The main park, that we visited, is 156 square miles, whereas Kejimkujik Seaside is an isolated stretch (under 10 square miles) along the Atlantic coast.

To visit the park you need a permit, costing about CA\$6 a day for adults – you can get them when you enter, at the Parks Canada

visitor reception at 3005 Main Parkway, Maitland Bridge.

You can book campsites when you arrive but in peak season it's best to pre-book. They cost from CA\$25.50 a night; you can reserve them from late April / early May at www.reservation.pc.gc.ca. There are 46 backcountry campsites scattered along the canoe and hiking routes. Each site has two tent pads, a firebox, a picnic table, a pit privy, bear cables for hoisting up food and firewood. Most campsites can accommodate six people, but there are three that can accommodate up to 10 people.

When to go

The park is open all year round for day visits but not for camping. Some of the campsites are open from early April; the rest open in mid May. Visitor reception is open from mid May until mid October and opening hours vary, so it's worth phoning ahead and checking if you're planning on showing up and booking campsites on arrival.

What to take

Pack the Kejimkujik Backcountry Guide

map (available from the park visitor centre, or shops in Halifax including the Mountain Equipment Co-op on Granville Street and the Trail Shop on Quinpool Road), a compass, full camping equipment including a tent, a sleeping bag, a roll mat, a camping stove and utensils, water and/or water purification tablets, all food, insect repellent, sun cream and an axe if possible to make kindling.

Canoe/equipment hire

Whynot Adventure, based at Jake's Landing on the banks of Kejimkujik Lake, offers canoe rentals from CA\$40 a day (24 hours) and can shuttle you to specific points. It can also rent camping gear including sleeping bags, stoves and tents, and barrels or dry bags to keep your kit in, although we went without and were OK. The company's opening times roughly correspond with when the park is open, so mid May to mid October. See www.whynotadventure.ca.

More information

There's more trip planning advice on the Parks Canada website, www.parkscanada.gc.ca/keji.

Walk of Fife

The Fife Coastal Path offers 117 miles of spectacular scenery, wildlife and castles. **Jacquetta Megarry**, co-author of a new guidebook on the route, has more



What is it?

The Fife Coastal Path opened in 2003 as an 81-mile route from North Queensferry (near Edinburgh) to Newport-on-Tay (near Dundee), and was extended at both ends in 2012 to 117 miles, from Kincardine to Newburgh.

Where is it?

It follows the coastline of the Fife peninsula along the Firth of Forth, the North Sea coast and the Firth of Tay. It's best walked anticlockwise to put the prevailing wind at your back almost throughout. Reach the start from Glasgow or Edinburgh, and depart from the end via Dundee or Perth, depending on whether you opt for either or both extensions.

Why did you decide to walk it?

It's easily accessible from my home (Edinburgh), yet it has remote sections and challenging terrain. The Kingdom of Fife is more island than peninsula, and there are signs of its proud history everywhere: whitewashed fishermen's cottages, castles and ancient churches, and St Andrews – home of golf and of Scotland's first university.

Did it live up to its appeal?

The coastal scenery was much as I'd expected, with beaches, sea stacks and caves. But there were some great surprises along the way: staring at a rock in Largo Bay that arched its back and swam off; stumbling upon the Wemyss Caves, which house Britain's best collection of Pictish

carvings; rounding the corner at Fife Ness where a breathtaking vista opens up to the Firth of Tay and hills to the north; following the Seashell Trail to the old Ice House in Tentsmuir Forest, and the moving memorial to the 1879 Tay Bridge disaster, engraved with the names and ages of all 59 victims.

I found further unexpected delights in

Fife Coastal Path: fast facts

Trail length: 117 miles.

Start point: Kincardine.

End point: Newburgh.

How many days does it take to walk? Nine or 10 days for the extended route, but many people opt for the original bridge-to-bridge route (North Queensferry to Newport-on-Tay) in seven days. Allow an extra day for the Isle of May boat trip.

What should you pack? Stout footwear plus crocs or sandals for beach-walking. And, as for any long hike in Scotland, hiking gear including recently tested waterproofs and blister protection.

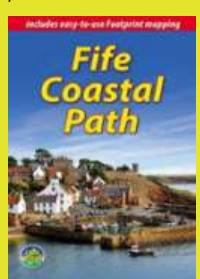
When should you go? Ideally between April and September.

What are the dangers? Tide

awareness is vital in places, especially east of St Andrews and on the Elie Chainwalk.

What are the highlights? Walking beneath the Forth bridges; coastal scenery with sea stacks, caves and beach-walking; castles, towers and churches; charming fishing villages; Fife Ness; Tentsmuir Forest; and the Elie Chainwalk and Isle of May (side trips).

Get the guidebook: *Fife Coastal Path* by Sandra Bardwell and Jacquetta Megarry, published by Rucksack Readers (£12.99, www.rucsacs.com).





Interesting rock:
Caiplie Caves

Sandra Bardwell



Kinraig Point: the Elie Chainwalk
scramble is at sea level here

Jacquetta Megarry

'The Kingdom of Fife is more island than peninsula'

two side-trips. One morning I did the Elie Chainwalk – a daring scramble above the waves, with chains as handholds. I had previously fallen off it, drowning a camera in the process, so it was deeply satisfying to complete it. At lunchtime I took the boat trip from Anstruther to the Isle of May, to see its puffins, seals, monastery and lighthouse. I finished with award-winning fish and chips and a pint of real ale – what a day!

How about the logistics?

The route is well waymarked and has plenty of B&Bs, except for the extensions at the start and finish where accommodation is scarce and the daily distances are long (17-18 miles). Advance booking is essential in Fife, especially when golfing events and arts festivals happen in its East Neuk, or graduation at St Andrews. Apart from a single hostel, there are no bunkhouses or hostels along or near the route and campsites are sparse.



Pretty and ancient:
St Monans Church

Ian Clydesdale

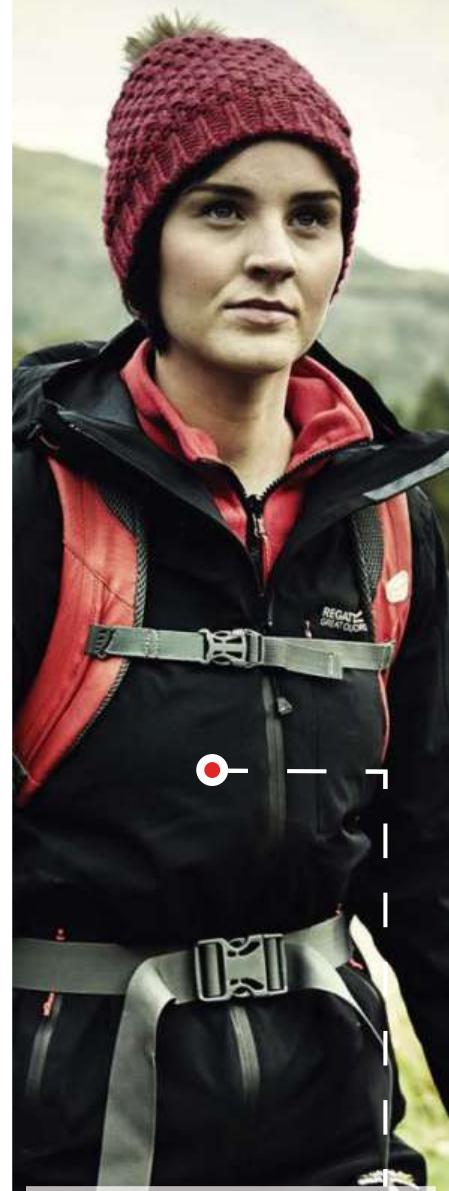
Throughout most of the route there are plenty of cafes, pubs and restaurants, but none between Crail and St Andrews. That is also the section with the most challenges from terrain and tides.

Why should everyone else walk it?

This is ideal for those who like coastal scenery, wildlife and castles. It combines immense variety with access to creature comforts. It's mainly low-level, but it includes some challenging terrain. The going underfoot ranges from rocky and sandy beaches to cycleways and disused railway trackbed, from golf courses to forest tracks and includes only short stretches of minor road. 

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Cuban cycling

Cuba is on the cusp of change. But after a spectacular cycling trip, **Abigail Butcher** hopes it won't change too fast, or too much





We're nearing the end of a two-hour cycle that has taken us along an empty, coastal road with the shimmering Caribbean Sea on one side, the other roughly divided fields broken with horses, cows and goats grazing under the blazing sun. As we draw closer to our destination, Trinidad, we pedal past stalls selling mangos, their fragrance giving me extra energy as I battle against the searing heat.

The last slog up a long, steep hill is rewarded when, at the top, we are greeted with a vibrant, cheerful mural announcing our arrival into the town.

I'm in Cuba, and after five days



Cuban delights: the peninsula at Cienfuegos

of cycling we've arrived in colonial Trinidad – a town frozen in time like the rest of this beautiful country. We cycle the last 10 minutes towards our *casa* – the family home where we'll stay for the next two nights – around cobbled streets, past street markets, children playing ball, dogs running around in packs and all generations sitting in their doorways chatting, smoking or laughing as they watch the world go by. Life in Cuba takes place in the street, and to absorb so much as we pass on bicycles is a privilege.

I'm on a nine-day tour with adventure travel company Explore, starting in Havana, pedalling through tropical forests to Viñales in the west, then the infamous Bay of Pigs and Cienfuegos to historic Trinidad before heading back to Havana.

I have had Cuba on my bucket list for donkeys' years. But with the historic shift in relations with the US, this year was time to go. There have been warnings for years that Cuba won't be the same forever, but these recent changes mean the Caribbean island is on the cusp of a tidal wave of change.

The US broke links with Cuba in the 1960s and any travel or trade between the two countries was banned. But in December last year, Barack Obama and Raul Castro (who took over from his brother Fidel in 2006) announced a thawing of relations. The two met for the first time this April, and a month later the US removed Cuba from its list of state sponsors of terrorism and announced plans to resume ferry and air services between the two countries. On 20 July, the countries' embassies ➤

Who's writing?



Abigail Butcher is a freelance journalist specialising in health, fitness and travel with a passion for adventure, contributing to a wide range of publications. She has raced a yacht across the Atlantic, cycled the highest mountain pass in Colorado, trekked and skied the Indian Himalayas and is currently in training for the Oman Desert Marathon. She lives in Lymington, Hampshire, where she spends the summers sailing.



Onwards and upwards:
tough going in the heat

opened in each other's capitals.

The romantic images you see of vintage American cars roaming streets surrounded by crumbling, colonial mansions are accurate, and evidence that Cuba has been in a state of virtual 'lock-down' since the 1960s. Arriving in the country is like stumbling across a lost Amazonian tribe – under Fidel Castro's rule this nation existed almost away from the rest of civilisation.

It's not just changes brought by renewed relations with the US. Raul Castro is phasing out the 50-year-old ration system, allowing property to be bought and sold, and widening communication. Historically subject to the strictest internet censorship in the world, only around seven per cent of Cuba is currently online. But recently

'Life in Cuba takes place in the street, and to pass on bicycles is a privilege'

35 public wifi sights have been set up in 16 cities around the country (albeit too pricey for locals), and Raul has pledged that the entire country will be online by 2020.

All this change in such a short time sounds baffling, and it's also rather sad. There are huge expectations on the lifting of US sanctions, but with this freedom, privilege and opportunity will spring greed. And that will change Cuba for eternity.

We began our tour in Havana where I spent an afternoon wandering around alone, and have never felt so safe anywhere in the world. Meandering the backstreets, taking endless pictures of people, cars and crumbling facades – this is the most photogenic country I have ever visited – I came across nothing more than children playing with tennis balls and the occasional "*hola bonita*" with no feeling of intimidation. Long may that last.

Earlier that morning we had toured Havana's sites in open-top vintage American cars – most of which are now taxis, and most of which have had their huge gas-guzzling engines replaced with more fuel-efficient versions. How their owners could afford it I don't know. Most people here are employed



4 MORE... CUBAN ADVENTURES

Abigail Butcher with four more Cuban delights...

1 Walking

Explore offers a similar trip to our cycling excursion, with an eight-day walking tour of Western Cuba, staying in family guesthouses, exploring Havana and hiking through the Topes de Collantes mountainous tropical forest, Viñales and Trinidad. See www.explore.co.uk.

2 Diving

Cuba's warm 24°C (yearly average) waters are clear and pristine with hardly any coral destruction or pollution. The average visibility is 30 to 40 metres, and Cuba is home to 50 species of coral and 200 species of sponge. Captivating Cuba offers tailor-made diving in María La Gorda and Cayo Coco & Cayo Guillermo. See <http://captivatingcuba.com>.

3 Sailing

G Adventures offers a six-night sailing trip on a catamaran from Havana through the beautiful turquoise waters of the Canarreos Archipelago, stopping to snorkel or share a drink with friendly locals. See www.gadventures.com.

4 Horse riding

Wild Frontiers offers a 12-day riding trip in the fertile farmland of Pinar del Río province, in the footsteps of Cuba's traditional *vaqueros* (cowboys). Spend up to five hours in the saddle each day, journeying through the foothills of the Alturas Pizzarosas, Viñales Valley, Trinidad and the stunning Escambray Mountain range. See www.wildfrontiers.com.

by the state on wages equivalent to around £10 a month, including our fantastic guide, Jaime (pronounced Huy-mai). They basically rely on the burgeoning number of tourists for tips.

Massive restoration projects are underway in Cuba's capital, including dredging in the bay to prepare it for an influx of cruise ships. I dread to think how that wonderful, sleepy seafront peppered with the odd bar and craft market will change in years to come.

We drove past the drab government buildings on Plaza de la Revolución (Revolution Square) to the banks of the Almendares River, sticky with chicken feathers from Afro-Cuban religious sacrifices. We continued along boulevards lined with flamboyant, yellow laburnum trees, marvelling

at the eclectic architectural mix, from 1950s American-style houses to colonial homes, drab communist high-rise apartment blocks and empty mansions. It's a pattern we get used to throughout the trip.

We paused in Hotel Nacional, an art deco landmark in Havana, reminiscent of Cuba's 1950s heyday and now a national monument, where the coffee and the view from the terrace are equally spectacular.

Cuba is as famous for its mojito as it is for American cars, and after a hot day cruising the capital, it was time for our first taste of the mint, rum and sugar cocktail so synonymous with this island. Where better than in the rooftop bar of the Ambos Mundos hotel, a former home of Ernest

Hemingway with incredible views of Havana from the roof.

Be warned: as befitting a sugar-producing country, sugar is king in Cuba, and the locals have a sweet tooth. After about day three I was craving salty antidotes to the sweetness.

After a supper of lobster, which is everywhere here and on many menus for £10, it was time to hit the sack before the first day of cycling.

I'd taken my SPD pedals and cleated shoes, and our cycle mechanic Fernando was armed with Allen keys to swap the pedals on my Stevens Galant hybrid bike – comfy for gentle cruising, but rather more heavy than the Trek road bike I ride at home.

The best months to visit Cuba for a bike tour are November to March, ➤



Historic centre in
Cuba's capital, Havana

'The romantic images you see of vintage American cars roaming streets surrounded by crumbling, colonial mansions are accurate'

when it's a pleasant 25°C and less humid than during my June visit, when temperatures averaged 35°C and humidity around 90%. It did mean there were fewer tourists though.

We began by heading out to the eco-village of Las Terrazas near Pinar del Rio in the south west, past countryside of cornfields, palm trees and simple, colourful dwellings, then on into the rainforest reserve, where French settlers created coffee farms. We sipped eye-wateringly strong coffees in María's Bar while gazing out over mango, avocado and mariposa – a heavenly type of jasmine tree, and Cuba's national flower – before setting off on an undulating journey through the hills, bound for the fertile Viñales Valley.

Two sweaty hours later we retreated to the cool of our ever-present, air-

conditioned bus after lunch in Soroa, stopping at a tobacco farm to see how these precious leaves are grown, harvested and dried. The Cuban cigar is world famous, and I shall never again see one smoked without remembering how the leaves are painstakingly farmed and cigars made by hand in one of Havana's huge, hot factories.

Discovering the sights and sounds of real Cuba from a bike is a joy. We passed pineapple, banana and mango plantations, tobacco crops and agave trees in rich, red fertile land; guinea fowls and chickens scratching at the roadside, as we came into the Viñales Valley, with a backdrop of abrupt, limestone mountains.

Viñales was our first taste of life with locals in a *casa*. Cubans with houses big enough have been able to rent out rooms



in the past few years and are doing well. Think basic beds and bedding, towels and plumbing, but you do get extreme cleanliness. The Cubans take immense pride in their houses, and those who have been renting rooms are earning good money, as are the family-run restaurants, or *paladares*, which generally offer better value food than the state-run restaurants.

The food is improving here, along with everything else, but simple also means delicious – almost every menu features grilled fish (red snapper, tuna and mahi mahi prevail), along with shrimps, lobster, pork and chicken, always served with plain white rice and a salad garnish, for between £8–£15.

One member of my group had visited Viñales five years ago, when there were just two *paladares* in the town. Today, the entire main street is taken up with them: more signs that Cuba is changing.

After a quick visit to the cool limestone caves, we cycled through swamps to the Bay of Pigs (Bahía de Cochinos), famous for the failed 1961



Colourful Trinidad: life in Cuba is on the streets

invasion by the CIA. Many American lives were lost, but few Cubans (who were ready for the attack), and the road is marked with monuments.

While we cycle, we crunch over dead crabs and swerve to avoid live ones – this Caribbean isle is home to a variety of land crabs that scuttle down to the sea to breed. There's also a crocodile farm worth stopping in – breeding the crocs for preservation and for meat (increasingly eaten by tourists).

On we cycled to Cienfuegos, a city on the southern coast of Cuba and one of the richest, founded by sugar merchants in the early 1800s. The houses are huge here, a throwback from when the town's rich inhabitants built bigger and grander houses to prove their wealth. One, the Palacio de Valle in the bay, is now classed as a national monument, its Moorish turrets typical of much of the town's early architecture.

Cienfuegos – nicknamed Pearl of the South – was declared a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2005, and its colourful centre is my favourite of the whole trip,

with a large, airy main square, Parque José Martí, lined with picture-postcard palm trees and vintage cars.

Nearing the coast, we're gagging for a swim. We might have only averaged around 40km a day, but in this heat and on heavier bikes than I'm used to, it seems like double the distance. We stop to take a welcome dip in the sea at Yaguanabo before cycling on to the pretty painted houses and cobbled streets of Trinidad.

This preserved town is a favourite of many tourists, and it's the place where I saw most evidence of tourism. It's still brimming with Cuban life though, with salsa dancing and fabulous mojitos (costing around £1.50) at Casa de la Musica and a fabulous nearby beach, Playa Ancon, with white sands and clear blue waters (and jellyfish, as I learned to my peril).

I spent two nights in Casa Zenia, which has Tripadvisor stripes for its friendly family (we managed to converse well, despite my lack of Spanish and their lack of English) and

delicious breakfast of home-made pineapple, papaya and guava cake, fruit, eggs, ham and cheese served in a spotlessly clean courtyard.

Every morning, as I stepped out of my air conditioned room into the gathering heat of the day, looked up at the blue sky, at the bright pink bougainvillea growing on the yellow and red walls of the casa courtyard, I made a wish that life could always be this simple. Cuba will change, I just selfishly hope it will not change too fast, nor too much. **AT**

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Hey Che: portrait of the legend

LET'S GO

Want to do what Abigail did? Here's how you can...

Geography

Cuba is the largest island in the Caribbean, sitting 90 miles off the coast of Key West, Florida. The country is divided into 15 provinces and one special municipality, Isla de la Juventud, spanning 44,200 square miles in all.

Cuba has a population of 11.2 million, with European, African and North American on its native roots. Cuban Spanish is spoken, but English is becoming increasingly spoken – or at least understood!

Despite the American vintage cars, Cuba has a low environmental impact, so much so that in 2006 it was the only country in the world to meet the World Wildlife Fund criteria for sustainable development.

The tour

Explore's 15-day Cycle Cuba tour starts from £2,238 and includes return flights, eight nights' standard hotel accommodation, six nights in *casas* on a bed and breakfast basis, bike hire, transport and the services of a tour leader, driver and cycle guide. See www.explore.co.uk.

Get there

Virgin Atlantic flies directly from London Gatwick several times a week, although we flew Air France via Amsterdam from London Heathrow to Havana.

When to go

Cuba is hot and sunny, with a tropical climate. It cools during the dry season, from November to April, to as low as 15°C, but during the wet season (May to October) expect daily rain showers and hot, steamy temperatures of up to around 35°C. The peak tourist season runs from December to March and July/August.

What to take

I would advise taking your own SPD or basket pedals to make things easier – the terrain is undulating and in the heat you are working twice as hard as at home. Also remember padded shorts, plenty of sunscreen, a helmet and isotonic sports tablets/powder and rehydration powders, to replace lost salts in the heat.

Most everyday items that we take for

granted, from toiletries to clothing to batteries, are in short supply in Cuba, so if you can fit any extras in your suitcase you will make someone very happy with a small gift.

Currency and prices

Cuba operates a dual currency system. Visitors use the Cuban Convertible Peso (CUC), which is shown in writing as \$. Locals use the Cuban Peso (CUP), which is worth far less than the CUC. Very few places take debit or credit cards, and very few ATMs accept foreign cards, so take the amount of money you will need in pounds sterling (with notes in good condition) and change it at a bank or large hotel. US Dollars are not accepted and you will be charged 10% commission to exchange them.

When paying for items, or a meal, find out beforehand whether the price is in CUC or CUP, and check transaction sums carefully.

When tipping, bear in mind that most Cubans exist on the equivalent of £10 a month, so any extra means a lot to them.

Pack perfection

For multi-day hiking, **Bryn Davies** and **Rosie Fuller** review rucksacks with a carrying capacity of approximately 65 litres

If you're planning a multi-day hike carrying all your kit, you'll need a rucksack that is big enough to pack it all into, tough enough to endure the inevitable abuse that comes with outdoor use, and comfortable enough to walk with all day. There are infinite sizes to choose from. Hikers who take a minimalist approach, where tarps replace tents and every gramme is counted, will be able to get away with packs that some people believe fall into the 'daysack'

category. At the other extreme, if you're embarking on a monster expedition into the wild, with tough conditions and no resupplies for days or even weeks, you'd probably look at packs with a carrying capacity of around 90 litres. But for something in the middle – a few days to a week of hiking where you'll be carrying camping kit, clothes and some food and drink in conditions that aren't too extreme – we find packs with a capacity of around 65 litres are just right.

'If the fit is good you'll feel it – it's like being strapped into a comfortable seat'

When it comes to buying a rucksack we offer the same advice that we do with most outdoor kit: rule number one is to make sure it's comfortable. Carrying a heavy pack is hard work, so if you get one that doesn't fit your body



FIVE TOP TIPS

for packing an expedition pack

CENTRE OF GRAVITY

Make sure the centre of gravity is as close to the lower back as possible. If you pack the bulk of the weight too high, then the pack will be unstable. If you pack it too low it will pull unduly on your shoulders. And if the weight is too far back then again the pack will be unstable, uncomfortable and pull you backwards.

SMART PACKING

There are few things more frustrating than having to empty your pack in the middle of a rainstorm to try and find your waterproof jacket. Make sure you pack items that you may need quick access to in places where you can reach them in an instant. Snacks, head torches and cameras, as well as spare layers, are more examples.

COMPRESSION STRAPS

These are so often over-looked, but if you tighten the pack's compression straps once it's loaded it will hold everything in place and improve stability while you're on the move.

CONTAMINATION

If you're packing liquid fuel for the stove there's always a risk that it could leak and contaminate the rest of your rucksack, so pack it somewhere where a spill will do as little damage as possible, like a waist pocket. Also carry a stuff sack (or even a plastic bag) to separate smelly or wet clothes from clean ones.

WHEN IT RAINS

While rucksacks can be water resistant up to a point, in bad conditions your kit is going to get soaked. To keep your gear dry it's best to use a rain cover for the outside of the pack (many rucksacks will come with these as standard) and dry bags on the inside, to make completely sure your kit stays dry. We find raincovers have other uses too, like groundsheets in camp.

shape and size properly, you'll only be adding to the discomfort. Look at the back length and hip belt. If a rucksack is the right back length it will sit comfortably on the shoulders, and the harness will join the pack at about four or five centimetres below the shoulder line. A hip belt should be supportive and sit comfortably on or just above the hip bone. Everyone is different, and what fits us might not fit you, so it's best to go to a shop and try on a few packs. If the fit is good you'll feel it – it's like being

strapped into a comfortable seat. And once you've got the fit right, how you pack the bag is important too – keep the heaviest items low and as close to your back as possible.

As well as fit, other aspects of expedition packs to look at include how your gear is stored. Some packs have a few simple pockets and compartments, whereas others have a section for almost everything – for us, it's a compromise between being able to organise gear usefully while not losing

it in a remote pocket of the pack. If you think you'll use the pack as much for general travel as hiking, a rucksack with lots of ways to access the main compartment is useful. Other features we like are raincovers, hydration sleeves (particularly when they're separate from the main compartment), loops to clip extra gear and trekking poles to, and compression straps to help secure the load. While we like a nice lightweight pack, it's not worth it if it comes at the cost of comfort. ►

FEATURES...

of an expedition pack

SHOULDER STRAPS

Don't think that's the main load-bearing rucksack – that's the job of the hip belt. Too much weight through the shoulders makes carrying heavy and uncomfortable. Should help stabilise without digging in or slipping off the shoulders.

CHEST STRAP

These help keep the shoulder straps in place for added stability.

BACK SYSTEM

The back system is one of the most important parts of a rucksack, particularly when carrying heavy loads. In rucksacks this generally consists of an internal frame or made from light plastic sheets, alloy bars or fibreglass/carbon. These give the bag shape, weight and transfer the load onto the hips.

WATER POCKETS

Pouches on the sides of the pack, useful for storing water bottles, cooking fuel, water bottles, hiking/telescopic poles and more.

HIP BELT

Along with the back system, the hip belt is a feature that you need to get spot on. It should sit snugly above the hip bones, allowing the pack load to be spread evenly with no pressure points.

SIDE TENSION STRAPS

Like the top tension straps but connecting to the waist belt, again these are adjusted for better fit and stability. The load on to the hips.



HAUL LOOP

A handle on the top of the pack for manhandling the bag in everyday use.

WEIGHT

It's easy to think that a lighter pack is a better pack, but that's not always the case. When it comes to carrying heavy loads, opt for a pack that you find comfortable, rather than looking to save a few grammes on weight.

sack to have for storing close to hand. Floating

lids, are a great way to extend the storage capacity of a pack.

TOP TENSION STRAPS

bag, these strap connect straps to the tensioned webbing to the back, aiding stability.

SIDE CHAINS/ELASTICATED STORAGE POINTS

Handy loops for extra gear on to the outside.

HIKING POLE/ICE AXE LOOPS

Carrying heavy trekking poles really help, but you won't use them all the time (likewise on loppers that ice-axes). Attachment to poles and useful.

COMPRESSION STRAPS

to the bag, and the load, providing extra stability. Use them!

WATERPROOF LINERS

These slip over the outside of a pack to help provide waterproofing for both your kit and the bag – once wet the actual rucksack can take a long time to dry, which can be annoying later on in the trek. If it's really wet it's essential to put kit in dry bags inside the pack too.

Highlander Discovery 65

MEN'S

£69.99

www.highlander-outdoor.com

If there's one thing we've come to expect from Scottish brand Highlander it's low prices, and at £69.99 the Discovery 65 is almost half the price of the next cheapest pack in this men's review. I've been very happy with other Highlander rucksacks I've tested, particularly the Summit 25 daysack, so I was excited to see how the Discovery 65 would perform. It's a fully featured rucksack with a foam mesh back panel, an adjustable back length and a rain cover.

'The Discovery 65 is almost half the price of the next cheapest pack in this men's review'

The Discovery 65 weighs in at 1.95kg, which is nice and light for a rucksack of this size. The adjustable back system is called ABS Triple Lock, which is an easy-to-use Velcro strap system, and it works well at fine-tuning the fit, although there isn't much substance to it, which means that the pack won't carry weight as well as the more substantial (and more expensive) packs in this test. The hip belt, lumbar pad and shoulder straps have plenty of



cushioning and the mesh covering will help wick away moisture in warmer weather, but there's a lack of ventilation in the back system.



Sleeping bag compartment



Adjustable back system



Bright rain cover

In terms of organisation the Discovery 65 has ample possibilities for strapping kit on to the outside, with various straps and clips allowing you to attach a sleeping mat and trekking poles, while inside the main compartment can be split into two thanks to a drawcord divider. While there's a nice zip-up pocket on the lid, we would have preferred it if there were more external pockets for things you want easier access to.

Overall, if you're looking for a budget pack that will suit you for the occasional foray into the outdoors, or if you're going to be hopping from city to city, then the Discovery 65 is a suitable choice. It's not the most technical rucksack and there are better choices out there, but for £69.99 you'll be hard pushed to find better value for money.

In a line: A good pack for casual hikers and travellers

8 /10	WEIGHT
7 /10	ORGANISATION
7 /10	COMFORT
9 /10	VALUE FOR MONEY
8 /10	OVERALL

**AT
RATING**
8 out of 10

Vango Nanga 60+10

MEN'S

£120

www.vango.co.uk

The Nanga 60+10 sits nicely on the price scale at a competitive £120. The pack is made from a durable ripstop nylon and weighs in at 2.2kg, about the heaviest pack in this men's review. The main compartment provides the 60 litres of storage while further side pockets and the lid offer the extra 10 litres. The Nanga displays the Duke of Edinburgh Recommended Kit badge on its swing tag, meaning Vango donates to the DofE charity for every pack sold.

'When it comes to organisation you may be disappointed that the main compartment can't be split into two sections'

The rucksack's back system is Vango's A3 Advanced Adjust, helping the wearer get the best fit for their back size, and it's easily adjusted via two straps. The shoulder and hip straps offer good cushioning; the lumbar pad is a bit stiffer, though still comfortable. In terms of ventilation, grooves in the foam of the back pad will allow a bit of air flow.

When it comes to organisation you may be disappointed that the main compartment can't be split into two sections, though there is a handy front zip that allows you to access the contents of the rucksack in the same way that you



compartment from the front zip you have to un-clip the volume adjuster straps, which are small, fiddly and a pain to undo, especially when it's windy and rainy and you're wearing gloves. We would also liked to have seen some hip belt pockets on the rucksack.

All in all the Nanga is a nicely priced multi-day hiking pack. Despite a few minor frustrations the bag proves good value for money and we'd have no issues with using it on our next hike.

In a line: A good value for money pack



7/10	WEIGHT
7/10	ORGANISATION
8/10	COMFORT
8/10	VALUE FOR MONEY
8/10	OVERALL

Montane Grand Tour 70

MEN'S

£150www.montane.co.uk

The Grand Tour 70 is the first Montane rucksack that I've used. It's been designed for use on the 'celebrated, ultra long backpacking routes of the world,' and there's an emphasis on it being the perfect bag for unsupported stints in the wilderness, with a combination of a light weight (1.6kg) and a simple yet well-designed back system.

On first inspection the back system, straps and hip belt of the Grand Tour 70 look basic, but a lot of thought and design has gone into creating a set-up that provides load carrying comfort specifically for hiking. The VertEgo Tour back system can be shaped to the contours of the wearer's back and even removed for those who want to shave off every gramme possible. The back system works well but it's aimed at lightweight hikers – those carrying heavier loads will be better with a more supportive rucksack. The back system isn't adjustable, though the pack comes in two sizes: S/M or M/L.

Moving on to the pack itself, there's a lot happening on the Grand Tour 70. With six compression straps, four adjustment straps, five pockets (including the lid pocket and two hip belt pockets), and two trekking pole attachment loops, there's a hell of a lot of strapping flying around. It's great to have so much adjustment, but the loose straps get annoying.



The lid pocket opens at the front so it's easier for a trekking companion to access while you're wearing the pack. The rucksack's main compartment can be split into two sections. Where other packs have a pull cord to separate the upper from the

lower, the Grand Tour uses a divider that can be zipped into place. It works well, though it's not as user-friendly as the aforementioned method.

In all the Grand Tour 70 is a decent multi-day hiking pack for lightweight enthusiasts. At 1.6kg it's an impressive weight, and the back system is comfortable if used correctly. There do seem to be too many straps hanging off the pack though, which can be frustrating.

In a line: Good lightweight option

'There's a lot happening on the Grand Tour 70. It's great to have so much adjustment, but the loose straps get annoying'

AT RATING
8 out of 10

8 /10	WEIGHT
8 /10	ORGANISATION
8 /10	COMFORT
7 /10	VALUE FOR MONEY
8 /10	OVERALL



Millet Prolighter MXP 60+20

MEN'S

£160

www.millet.fr

Having reviewed Millet's Switch Low GTX shoes in the last issue of *Adventure Travel*, when I awarded them the Highly Recommended badge of honour, I was keen to try the Prolighter MXP 60+20. While the other packs in this review are designed mostly for trekking, the Prolighter reflects Millet's heritage by being aimed at mountaineers who will be undertaking 'faraway expeditions at high altitude.'

It's worth mentioning straight away that if you're looking for a pack that'll

'The pack reflects Millet's heritage by being aimed at mountaineers'

carry a heavy load on a multi-day hike then there are far better products out there. But if you're going to be on a self-supported expedition in the mountains, and using the Prolighter in its intended environment, then there's very little to be disappointed about.

The Prolighter weighs in at just 1.4kg, which is particularly impressive when you consider that the main compartment expands to a massive 80 litres when the collar is extended to its full length. To keep weight low, Millet includes only the essential features, giving a practical simplicity that's hard not to like. This can be seen in the X-Lighter back system, which



offers comfort at low weights (although this comfort is compromised if you make the pack too heavy).

You get into the main compartment of the Prolighter from the top, where as well

ng there's a long zip half way down the N/while this makes it a c/it at the bottom of /would like to have seen vider and an entrance ie bottom of the bag. /get two large, stretch ockets, a removable h a large, zip-up pocket vo ice axe holders, could also be used to carry trekking poles. /se looking to use the n multi-day hikes /d themselves a little disappointed with the lack tures, while those be using it on more al excursions will ate the low weight and esign that just, well, /s nothing fancy but it ed to be.

good mountaineering pack, not so good for carrying heavy loads

9
/10 **WEIGHT**

6
/10 **ORGANISATION**

8
/10 **COMFORT**

7
/10 **VALUE FOR MONEY**

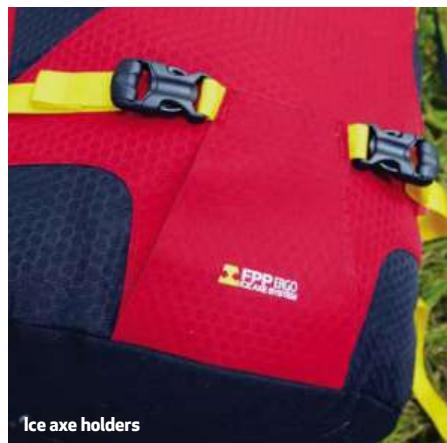
7
/10 **OVERALL**



Loads of storage



Simple back system



Ice axe holders

Osprey Atmos AG 65

MEN'S

£180

www.ospreyeurope.com

Based in the United States, Osprey has been designing and manufacturing quality rucksacks since 1974. This year at a big trade show in Germany, Mike Pfotenhauer, founder of the company, was named OutDoor Ceo of the Year 2015, for his significant contribution to the industry and his influence and talent when it comes to making rucksacks. The brand's entry for this review is the Atmos AG 65. It features a unique back system that typifies the clever design and execution that Mike has become known for.

The AG in the name stands for Anti Gravity and it is this concept that the pack has been designed around. While you can certainly still feel the weight of the pack, the comfort provided by the seamless mesh back panel and supportive hip belt (which Osprey claims is the world's first fully ventilated) is impressive, and the pack offers unrivalled ventilation and exceptional load support and stability. The shoulder straps offer loads of cushioning and the hip belt hugs the body reassuringly.

The impressive design continues with the main body of the rucksack. The Atmos AG 65 is fully featured, with enough pockets, straps and pouches to suit most multi-day trekking needs. Where other



Adventure
Travel
BEST
IN TEST

This is great for stuffing your jacket into and two extremely useful pockets on the hip belt. If I had one niggle it's that the pack is on the heavy side compared to others in this category, coming in at 2.1kg, but aside from that there's not much to complain about. The Atmos is clear to see Mike Pfotenhauer's design heritage shining through. Everything is well made and each component serves a purpose, which it executes well. The back system is brilliant and the pack has just the right number of pockets and storage options. If you're happy to pay the price you'll be one happy customer.

In a line: A fantastic rucksack

AT
RATING
9 out of 10

7/10	WEIGHT
9/10	ORGANISATION
9/10	COMFORT
8/10	VALUE FOR MONEY
9/10	OVERALL



Handy hip pocket



Comfy back system



Front stash pocket

Black Diamond Mercury 65

MEN'S

£180

www.blackdiamondequipment.com

Black Diamond is an American brand that makes top quality gear for climbing and skiing. The company's head torches are possibly the pieces of kit we see around the most, but we've yet to be disappointed with anything from the brand. Its entry for this review is the Mercury 65 – a 65-litre pack with some great features that make it a worthy choice for multi-day hikes and expeditions.

The main talking point of the Mercury 65 is the exciting ergoACTIVE XP suspension back system. The hip belt comes detached from the main pack and you attach it to a pivot with an allen key. The pivot allows the pack to move with the wearer's natural body movements (while keeping the hip belt stationary), providing extra comfort and support and reducing the friction that can come from wearing a heavy pack. The pack and the hip belt moving independently to one another can seem a bit alien at first, but once you get used to it it's great. The hip belt and the shoulder pads provide some cushioning, and while you might expect a pack with so much technology to weigh a tonne, at 2.1kg it's not too bad.

The bag itself has two large water-resistant zips on the front. One leads to a useful pocket with internal organisers, and the other is an opening to the main compartment of the rucksack so that you can open it like a holdall. You get a further water-resistant pocket on the hood, and there are two wand



Travel Adventure
HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

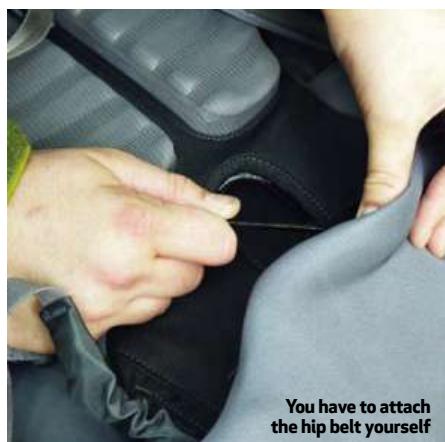
pockets to store things like water and gas bottles. There's no internal space divider, but the bottom of the rucksack has taped seams, so that your kit doesn't get wet when you lie the pack down – a great feature.

All in all the Mercury 65 is a really interesting pack. The ergoACTIVE back system has performed well in our initial tests, though we'd be interested to see how it fares in an extended test. The water-resistant zips and taped seams are thoughtful touches. It might not be best for those who need to carry excessive amounts of kit, but it will be just fine if you pack sensibly!

In a line: Great back system and waterproofing

7/10	WEIGHT
6/10	ORGANISATION
9/10	COMFORT
8/10	VALUE FOR MONEY
9/10	OVERALL

AT RATING
9 out of 10



Berghaus Women's Trailhead 60 Rucksack

WOMEN'S

£90 | 1.6kg
www.berghaus.co.uk

I love this pack's simplicity. Unlike many of the others on test I understood how it works straight away, with no complicated flaps, baffling zips and clips. And that doesn't come at the expense of fit for purpose, it's just a useable pack at a good price. And the simplicity keeps the weight down too – the pack has snuck in as the lightest on test of the women's packs.

The pack opens at the top into the main compartment, which has a hydration sleeve. There's also a separate compartment at the bottom of the pack with its own zip-up entrance – ideal for a sleeping bag and mat for example – or you can get rid of the divider to just have one large main compartment. There are two large zip-up side pockets; sleeves for a bottle or similar on each side, and the fixed (as opposed to floating) lid has a large external pocket with a key ring clip.

As well as the pockets there are various methods of clipping extra gear on to the bag: walking pole attachment points plus loops on the lid, front and hip belt. So plenty of storage, although there's no pocket on the lid for a camera, something I find really useful. I also like webbing on the front of a pack to stash a layer in, although you could use one of the waist pockets for this. There aren't really any straps to tighten and neaten the contents of the pack – just one set at the



'I love its simplicity, and that doesn't come at the expense of fit for purpose'

back system, which can be adjusted on the move via a buckle by the waist. There's about 12cm of adjustment between the XS and XL sizes. The hip belt is pre-curved, comfortable and extremely easy to tighten, although I found the back panel a bit uncomfy against the lower back. As I'd expect, there's an adjustable chest strap too.

The pack comes with a rain cover, it isn't too bright, and a large grab handle. I like the colours too. It's not fancy, simple, lightweight, practical and affordable, and for multi-day hiking it will do the job well.

In a line: Light weight, simple and a good price

9 /10	WEIGHT
7 /10	ORGANISATION
7 /10	COMFORT
9 /10	VALUE FOR MONEY
8 /10	OVERALL

AT RATING
8 out of 10

bottom, which could also be used to attach a roll mat to the outside of the pack – but I don't mind this; they often just make a pack more complicated.

The rucksack uses Berghaus's Biofit



Waterproof cover



Adjustable back system



Bottom compartment

Lowe Alpine

Zephyr ND55:65

WOMEN'S

£140 | 1.85kg

www.lowealpine.com

I love Lowe Alpine packs.

ND 35:45 is my staple for mountaineering, ski touring and even days out scrambling or walking, so I was keen to see if I liked the Zephyr ND55:65 as much. And in case it comes up in a pub quiz, the ND in Lowe Alpine's women's packs stands for Nanda Devi – a Himalayan peak whose name means 'bliss-giving goddess.' Nice.

'The ND stands for Nanda Devi, a Himalayan peak meaning bliss giving goddess'

Like my Alpine Attack, it is extremely light, weighing 1.85kg (one of the lighter packs on test), but this doesn't mean carrying comfort is compromised, and it's still fairly durable too. The bag is made from tough TriShield fabrics, and it uses Lowe Alpine's breathable Axiom Light back system, which you can adjust while wearing the pack to make sure the back length is the right fit.

The pack has fewer compartments than most on test, which is to keep things simple. There's the main compartment, which can be accessed via



the floating lid or a zip down one side of the main compartment, and the lid has two good pockets, one with a key clip. There's a deep

slot on each side of the bag, and a useful mesh pocket on the front of the pack, where you can stash a spare tool to keep close to hand.

Finally there are pockets on the hip belt; one with a zip, perfect for a camera; the other made from stretchy mesh and just right for a snack bar. And as well as the pockets there are various points to attach kit to, including ice axe and pole loops and even a strap for a rear light.

In cover in the bottom tab handle at the top; a chest strap and the waist band is comfy and easy to adjust. And as Alpine Attack bag I love the colour: the Zephyr ND comes in purple or black. Some might miss having a few more storage options, but other than that this is a great, pack for light multi-day hiking, and the price is nice too.

In a line: Light, tough and nice looking

9	WEIGHT
8	ORGANISATION
8	COMFORT
9	VALUE FOR MONEY
8	OVERALL

**AT
RATING**
8 out of 10



Pole attachment



Side zip to the main compartment



We love the purple

Deuter

Aircontact 60+10 SL

WOMEN'S

£160 | 2.69kgwww.deutergb.co.uk

Deuter packs are generally quite heavy and that's the case with the Aircontact 60+10 SL, which is the heaviest on test at 2.69kg. While the weight is offset by the bag's extra padding and carrying comfort, if you're planning to use it for general travel as well as hiking, that extra kilogram or so can be costly at the airport check in.

But comfort is immediately apparent, mostly because of the enormous hip belt, which has been designed specifically for women: more curved, with a conical shape and angled slightly upwards. The back system and shoulder straps are also designed for women, and the Aircontact back system claims to reduce sweating by 15%. The back length is adjustable so you can get the fit just right.

In terms of storage the pack is a fairly standard, easy-to-use set-up. The main compartment is accessed by the floating lid and a U-shaped zip on the front to make packing and reaching your gear easier, and there's an internal hydration sleeve. There's also an (optional) bottom compartment, for things like sleeping gear, with its own zip. The lid has two large pockets: one internal, one external. There is a stash pocket on each side of the pack and one zip-up side pocket, that Deuter suggests could hold the map.



The hip belt has a large pocket, big enough for a compact camera. There's no stash pocket on the front of the pack for a spare layer, but I'm sure you'd find somewhere else to put this. Instead it's covered in loops

to clip gear to, and there are loops for poles or ice axes too.

There's a rain cover stored in the bottom of the pack, and the bag has a large grab handle. I like the looks, and unashamedly love the yellow flower that comes on all of Deuter's women's packs. Not one for those who are counting every gramme, but other than that this is a comfy, easy to use, well-made pack.

In a line: Quite heavy but very comfy – a textbook pack

'The weight is offset by the pack's comfort, but it can be costly at the airport check in'



7	10	WEIGHT
8	10	ORGANISATION
9	10	COMFORT
8	10	VALUE FOR MONEY
8	10	OVERALL



Jack Wolfskin

Denali 60 Women

WOMEN'S

£165 | 2.58kg
www.jack-wolfskin.co.uk

This is a nice trekking rucksack from German company Jack Wolfskin. At 2.58kg it's heavier than most of the packs on test, but probably not enough to be seriously noticeable.

The rucksack's main compartment can be accessed via the floating lid or a U-shaped zip on the front of the bag to help you get to things packed further down. Then there's another section with its own zip at the bottom of the bag, which I would use for things like a sleeping bag and mat, although you can unzip it to create one big main compartment if you prefer. The lid has both an internal and an external pocket, and the raincover is stored on the lid too. There's an additional zip-up pocket on the front of the pack, useful for things you might need occasionally throughout the day, like a spare layer; two mesh side pockets and one further zipped pocket on the side. Finally, and saving the most interesting until last, there's a pull-out pocket by the hip belt for a drinks bottle. This is great as I always find reaching round to the side of a pack to find a bottle a pain, although depending on the size of the bottle it might get in the way while you're walking – either way, it's there if you want it. There's also a hydration sleeve inside the main compartment. As well as all of the pockets there are loops for trekking poles and other attachment options for extra gear storage, although it's a shame there's no pocket on the hip belt for a camera.



Designed specifically for women, the back system is comfortable and adjustable; there is a choice of six sizes you can set it at. The chest strap has a whistle, which is a nice touch, and there's a large grab handle. I like the pack's looks and it comes in a choice of two colours: red or purple. It's not the most exciting pack on test, but that isn't a bad thing: it's a good, solid pack with some nice touches that will do the job well.

In a line: A solid multi-day hiking pack

'It's not the most exciting on test, but that isn't a bad thing: it's a good solid pack'

7/10	WEIGHT
8/10	ORGANISATION
8/10	COMFORT
8/10	VALUE FOR MONEY
8/10	OVERALL

**AT
RATING**
8 out of 10



Clever bottle holder



Pole attachment



Front opening

Gregory

Cairn 68

WOMEN'S

£180 | 1.9kg
www.gregorypacks.com

This is probably the most complicated pack on test. You get the hang of it, but at first we could have done with an instruction manual (luckily there's a good video on Gregory's website).

Gregory suggests that the pack has three storage areas: Camp, Trail and On-the-Go. The Camp sections are where you put things you'll only use in the evening; the Trail pockets are for gear that you'll need occasionally during the day (food or a first aid kit, for example), and the On-the-Go areas are for things you want close to hand all the time, like a map or a camera.

The pack's main section is accessed via the (floating) lid and also by a zip down one side, so you can get to kit further down the bag. There's a hydration sleeve, which is external, sitting behind the main compartment so you can get to your water without disturbing the rest of the bag – an excellent idea as water is one of the last things I pack. On the front of the bag there's another large compartment, with a mesh sleeve and a zipped pocket inside it, and on top of this is what Gregory calls a 'dump pocket,' where you can stash extra layers or anything you need close to hand. I love the idea but this is a complicated way of doing it, as the pocket uses three clips to open and close – some webbing would be more simple. Then there are two elasticated



Travel Adventure
BEST IN TEST

large clever pocket on the top of the lid: it's highly water resistant with a waterproof zip, and you roll it down to shut it.

Despite all of these features the pack is very light, partly because of the slim yet comfy straps and the lightweight back system. The Wire Wishbone frame is designed to transfer weight to the waist, and the autofit waistband aligns to the angle of the hips. Other features include a waterproof cover and a large grab handle, and the pack comes in a choice of three colours. There's a lot going on, but once you've got to grips with all the straps, this is a technical, lightweight pack at a good price.

In a line: Lightweight and interesting – one for pack geeks (like us)

9 /10	WEIGHT
9 /10	ORGANISATION
8 /10	COMFORT
8 /10	VALUE FOR MONEY
9 /10	OVERALL

AT RATING
9 out of 10



The roll down lid



Best in test:
the Cairn 68



Lots of front pockets

Arc'teryx Altra 62 Backpack Women's

WOMEN'S

£300 | 2.14kg (S/M) or 2.17kg (M/L)

www.arceryx.com

Arc'teryx kit is renowned for notch but with a stomach. This pack is no exception in both cases.

The pack comes in two which ever you choose there are also clips on the back (that Arc' GridLock system) so you can fine tune the fit, both in terms of height the straps are. These are for you've got it right you won't move them again, and they're probably more sturdy than Velcro.

A great feature is the Load Transfer Disc at the lower back, that with the body so that the lid goes with you when you clamber over tricky terrain. The first time you wear a pack with a feature like this it feels strange, but I love it. The back system is called Composite Construction and aims to be lightweight while supportive, and the pear-shaped design of the rucksack is aimed to keep the load close to the body, reducing backward pull.

The Altra has one main compartment that is accessed via the front, by a huge zip that goes all the way round the bag, like a holdall, so you can reach all of your gear regardless of where you packed it – this makes it useful for general travel as well as hiking. There's a hydration sleeve that is separate to the main bag – a feature I love as I always pack my water last. There are two pockets in the lid, and on the front of the bag a large zip-up stash pocket where you



Adventure
Travel
**HIGHLY
RECOMMENDED**

small elasticated pockets on the belt but they're only for really tiny bits and bobs. As well as the pockets there are loops so you can clip kit to the outside of the pack too.

The pack's material is light but tough and I like that there's an extra piece of reinforced material at the bottom, to protect the pack and zip when you're putting it on the ground. Another nifty feature is that the lid can be easily removed if you want to pare down the bag. A downside is that there's no waterproof cover – this won't bother some people, but after a rainy multi-day hike in the Lake District I'd always prefer one where possible. I'd only be able to justify spending £300 on a pack if I really knew I'd be getting the use out of it, but this is a good pack if you do. **AT**

In a line: Expensive but classy, we love the Load Transfer Disc

8 /10	WEIGHT
9 /10	ORGANISATION
9 /10	COMFORT
8 /10	VALUE FOR MONEY
9 /10	OVERALL

AT
RATING
9 out of 10



Holdall-style opening



Classy (and the pack's not bad either)



The hip belt swivels

Best of the Tests

Need to buy something we haven't tested this issue?
Here are the products that scored highest in our recent reviews

Hiking shoes



Rating

Product name	Price	In a line	Rating
Men's hiking shoes (July/August 2015)			
Lowa Renegade II GTX Lo	£135	Quality shoes, comfort and support – what more could you want?	9
Millet Switch Low GTX	£130	Excellent, fully-featured, well made shoes	8
Aku Nuvola	£135	They ooze quality and style	8
Women's hiking shoes (July/August 2015)			
The North Face Hedgehog Fastpack Lite GTX	£100	Light, waterproof and a good price	9
Scarpa Zen Pro	£129.99	Sexy but tough – what more does a girl want?	9
Meindl Portland GTX	£124.99	A textbook hiking shoe	8

Stoves



Rating

Product name	Price	In a line	Rating
Gas stoves (March/April 2015)			
Karrimor Alpine Stove	£44.99	Superb value for money	9
Edelrid Kiro TI	£45	Great quality and light weight	9
Alpkit Kraku	£25	Pocket rocket – incredibly light and surprisingly powerful	9

Down jackets



Rating

Product name	Price	In a line	Rating
Men's lightweight down jackets (November/December 2014)			
Berghaus Furnace Hooded Hydrodown Jacket	£200	A down jacket that won't self-destruct in wet conditions	9
Sherpa Nangpala Hooded Down	£250	Everything you could ask for from a lightweight down jacket, and more	9
PHD Wafer Down Jacket	£232	Mind-blowingly light and compressible while still retaining warmth	9
Women's lightweight down jackets (November/December 2014)			
Montane Featherlite Down Jacket	£180	Small, warm, light and a good price	9
Rab Microlight Alpine	£180	Hydrophobic down in a greatlooking, lightweight jacket	9
Black Diamond Cold Forge Hoody	£260	Innovative fill and a jacket of great beauty	9

Waterproof jackets



Rating

Product name	Price	In a line	Rating
Men's waterproof jackets under £150 (September/October 2014)			
Quechua Bionnassay 600	£149.99	Looks great and does the job brilliantly	9
Keela Cumulus Pro Mountain Jacket	£144.95	Slightly bulky and heavy but perfect for all-day rain	8
Patagonia Torrentshell	£110	A great buy – quality at the lower end of the price scale	8
Women's waterproof jackets under £150 (September/October 2014)			
Montane Atomic Jacket	£110	Brilliant, lightweight, multi-activity jacket	9
Sherpa Asaar	£150	So light it's untrue	9
Sprayway Eos	£150	Textbook waterproof jacket for walking	9

Tents



Rating

Product name	Price	In a line	Rating
Three-season two-man tents (May/June 2014)			
MSR Hubba Hubba NX	£335	A superb tent, definitely worth the money	9
Robens Goshawk	£349.99	An excellent, large two-man tent with huge porches	9
Vango Tempest 200	£160	A superb, affordable tent for hiking in all conditions	8

Pole stars

Trekking poles can make a hike much more enjoyable. Team AT puts six to the test

You don't have to be an ageing hiker with dodgy knees to appreciate hiking poles. If you're trekking over uneven terrain, tackling a long up or downhill slog, or travelling ultra light with a shelter that requires some sort of support, you'll experience the benefits of these simple yet massively useful pieces of kit.

The ideal trekking pole would weigh next to nothing, be tough enough to endure years of on-trail abuse, pack down to barely anything and have a handle that's comfortable enough to grip for days on end. In reality you'll

'You don't have to be an ageing hiker with dodgy knees to appreciate hiking poles'

usually have to reach some sort of compromise between the above: ultra lightweight options tend to be less durable and comfortable than their heavier brethren, but if you're going to be lifting them thousands of times a day, or packing them, you might be glad that you shaved those few grammes off.

Most trekking poles are made from either carbon or aluminium. Carbon will be lighter, but aluminium is more durable. For storage and carrying,

all of the poles in this review are telescopic, meaning that they have multiple sections that extend out from one another (the other option is a pole that folds up). The sections are either locked into place by a twisting mechanism or a clip. Whichever locking method is used, it's vital that the pole is able to take your weight without collapsing on itself. Here we've rounded up six trekking poles from across the price range to test.

Craghoppers

Superlite Shock Absorber

£25 (per pole)

www.craghoppers.com

The Superlite Shock Absorber from Craghoppers is a three-section pole that's adjusted by twisting and tightening the sections in opposite directions. Made from aircraft-grade aluminium it's light, weighing 224g per pole, extends up to 125cm and packs down to 60cm. It comes with a basket and a cover for the tungsten tip; the

added wrist strap is easily adjustable, and the cork handle is extended with further padding on the pole – useful when you want to hold the pole lower down on ascents or traverses. There's also a shock absorber that you click once you've adjusted the correct height although, pole on the Tour du Mont Blanc trek, I couldn't always work whether I had this on or not. The pole was great, although it did get stuck open or shut a couple of times. But a good tough, light pole, and it another two colour (black or purple) if you don't like the red. **RF**

AT rating: 8/10



Anatom

Explorer Trekking Poles

£35 (per pair)

www.anatomfootwear.co.uk

The Explorer Trekking Poles, which are sold as a pair, are three-section poles made from 6,000 aircraft-grade aluminium, adjusted and tightened by two clips on each pole. At first I thought that these clips would be cumbersome, but having used the poles on the Tour du Mont Blanc trek, I found them much easier than poles using the twisting method, and they're not much heavier, weighing 254g per pole. The poles extend up to a giant 135cm and come with a basket and a protective cover for the carbide tip. They pack down to 62cm. The lightly padded wrist strap is easy to adjust; the handle is EVA foam, which I find slightly more comfortable than cork, and it's extended down the pole for when you're walking uphill or traversing a steep slope. If you're looking for mega lightweight you might look elsewhere; if not good poles, good price. **RF**

AT rating: 9/10



Alpkit

CarbonLite Ultra

£45 (per pair)

www.alpkit.com

We've tested a few products from Alpkit recently and with each piece of kit comes amazement that the company can make such good quality, lightweight gear at rock bottom prices. At just £45 per pair, the CarbonLite Ultra poles amaze us once again, especially when you consider Alpkit's claim that they're 'unofficially lighter than the official lightest trekking poles in the world.'

The poles have full carbon fibre shafts, a tungsten tip (plus rubber bungs), an EVA foam handle and an adjustable wrist strap. The poles feature a twist lock mechanism to keep them at the required length and you also get a basket specifically for trekking. They're astoundingly light, at just 152g per pole, but this does come at the cost of some functionality. The handle of the pole isn't particularly ergonomic, allowing hands to slip and slide, especially when bearing weight, and the locking mechanism isn't as effective as we would have liked, occasionally allowing the pole to collapse on itself. **BD**

AT rating: 7/10



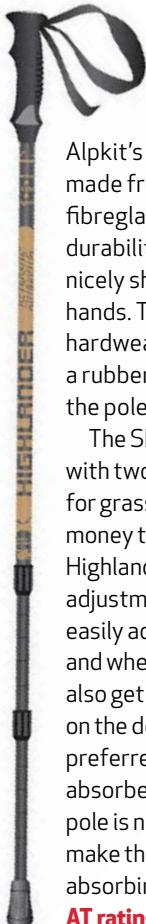
Pole position (that's Mont Blanc in the background, don'tcha know)

Highlander

Skye Carbon Lite

£79.98 (per pair)

www.highlander-outdoor.com



At 177g per pole, the Skye Carbon Lite poles are the second lightest in this review, being just 25g heavier than Alpkit's CarbonLite Ultras. They're made from a mix of 80/20 carbon/fibreglass to provide lightweight and durability, and the EVA foam grip is nicely shaped to sit comfortably in the hands. The tip of the pole is made from hardwearing tungsten and you also get a rubber bung for when you're using the pole on harder ground.

The Skye Carbon Lite poles come with two baskets, one for snow and one for grass, and this typifies the value for money that we've come to expect from Highlander. They feature a twist lock adjustment system, allowing you to easily adjust the length of the poles, and when fully tightened it's solid. You also get a shock absorber which is great on the downhills, but we would have preferred to be able to lock off the absorber for uphill sections or when the pole is needed for balance, as it can make them slightly unstable, while also absorbing some of your momentum. **BD**

AT rating: 7/10

Komperdell

C3 Carbon Powerlock

£99.95 (per pair)

www.firstascent.co.uk

Austrian company Komperdell has been making poles for outdoor leisure use since 1922, with hikers and skiers using the company's kit on everything from dog walks in the park to Himalayan epics. We've been testing the C3 Carbon Powerlock, a three-section pole that's designed to offer a combination of light weight and durability.

At 221g per pole the C3 Carbon Powerlock isn't the lightest in this review, largely down to Komperdell's Titanal-Rocksleeve lower section. While the two upper sections are made from carbon, the lower is made from a slightly heavier but more durable material to help protect the pole from on-trail damage – a trade off that is, in my opinion, worth it.

The foam grip is comfortable but a little minimalist. The strap is well-made and padded, and there's a tungsten tip. The pole is adjusted by clips called the Power Lock 2.0 mechanism and they work well, though they don't feel as substantial as those found on the Leki poles. **BD**

AT rating: 8/10

Leki

Aluba Lite

£110 (per pair)

www.ardblairsports.com

Weighing 234g per pole the Aluba Lites are among the heaviest in this test. But with this extra weight comes a more substantial pole that's stronger and more durable than the others. The shaft is made from high-strength aluminium, which is very hardwearing. You also get a comfortable and ergonomic handle thanks to Leki's Aergon edgeless foam grip.

The three-part pole is adjustable via the brilliant Speed Lock 2 system: easy to use clips that hold the pole securely in position (offering 30% more holding force than standard twist lock systems, apparently) and, in keeping with the rest of the Aluba, these feel solid, well made and hardwearing. Despite a lack of padding, the hand strap is soft and comfortable against the skin and the method of adjustment works well.

In conclusion, while the Aluba Lite may not be the lightest trekking pole on test, Leki's heritage in making great poles shines through. The kit is quality, and will last longer than cheaper alternatives. **BD**

AT rating: 9/10



website directory

Cycling Adventure Holidays

» Red Spokes

www.redspokes.co.uk
0207 502 7252

Equipment

» Ellis Brigham

www.ellis-brigham.com
0844 372 1010 / 0161 743 3847

» Harvey Maps

www.harveymaps.co.uk
01786 841 202

» Safarquip

www.safarquip.co.uk
01433 622001

Multi Activity

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0203 540 0266 / 0043 699 1731 7344

» Undiscovered Alps

www.undiscoveredalps.com
0845 009 8501

Safari

» Pure Safari

www.puresafari.com
01227 671 846

Adventure Tours

» Active Adventures

Activeadventures.com
0808 234 7780

» Borneo Travel

www.borneo-travel.com
0844 840 7777

» Green Peru Adventures

www.greenperuadventures.com
0051 84 252003 Mobile 0051 976 158788

» Lost Earth Adventures

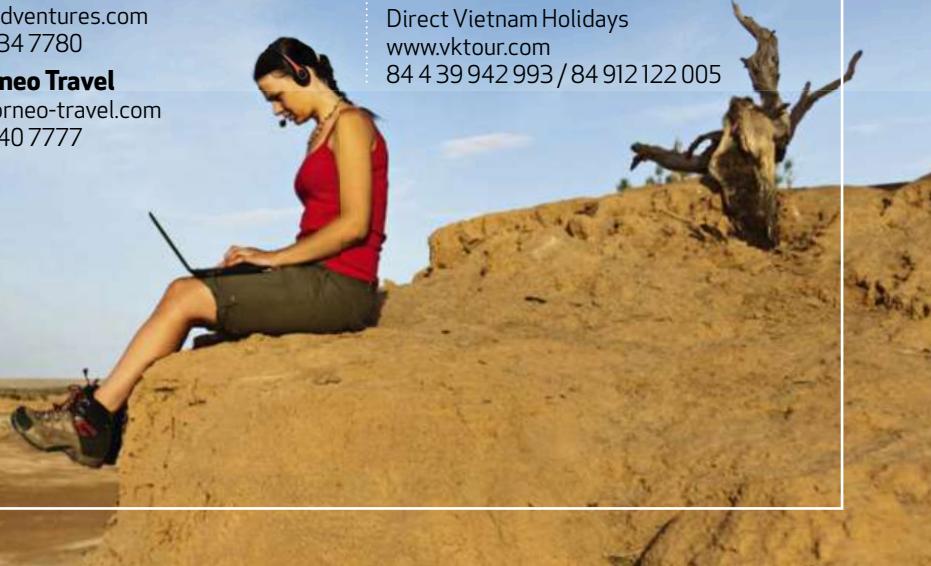
www.lostearthadventures.co.uk
01904 500094

» Oasis Overland

www.oasisoverland.co.uk
01963 363400

» VK Tour

Direct Vietnam Holidays
www.vktour.com
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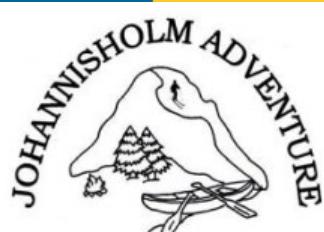
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Whatever next?

Want a sneaky peek at the next edition of *Adventure Travel*? Here's what you can expect...

20

Years

20

20th anniversary special!

Our November/December edition marks 20 years since the very first *Adventure Travel* magazine and it's going to be a bumper! We've got the 20 greatest adventures in the world ever (like ski touring the Haute Route from Chamonix to Zermatt, pictured), a huge prize giveaway, plus all sorts of other exciting festivities – don't miss it!

Winter skills



Learn how to walk on crampons, build a snow hole and have loads of fun sliding around with an ice-axe in Scotland

That's not all...



Rain dance
Waterproof jackets, winter base-layers and all the latest outdoor gear on test



Gift guide

It's that time of year again (well, it will be by then) – our November/December edition will be packed full of ideas for any adventurous stocking. Christmas shopping made easy

Plus Tales from Nepal, reader expeditions, adventurer interviews, inspirational events, spectacular photography and much more!

Save money!

A year's subscription to AT costs just £18 – that's 25% cheaper than if you were to buy each edition in the shops (and there are even more deals if you subscribe to the digital version). See www.adventuretravelmagazine.co.uk.

Forget snow, bring on the austral summer. To go with its famous Great Walks, New Zealand is creating Great Rides – long distance MTB trails on both islands. Sarah Stirling investigates

Down under

The November/December edition of *Adventure Travel* is out at the end of October, provided we haven't all already left to start our ski seasons. It's available for smartphones and tablets, or on good old-fashioned paper from WHSmiths or the newsagent Martin McColl. Or you can pick up a copy or subscribe at www.adventuretravelmagazine.co.uk. **AT**

EXPEDITIONS

Doing something epic, eccentric or generally exciting? Put it on our noticeboard – email rosie@atmagazine.co.uk

COCKLESHELL ENDEAVOUR

Who? Mick Dawson and Steve Grenham, Brighton.

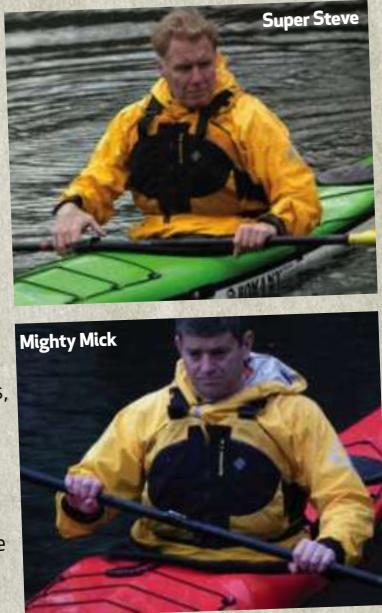
What? The Cockleshell Endeavour will see two Falkland's veterans complete a daunting 650-mile circumnavigation of the unforgiving coastline of the Falkland Islands in kayaks. Before embarking on this endeavour, we will be completing a number of tough training challenges, including competing in the Devizes to Westminster canoe/kayak race, the Yukon River Quest and circumnavigations of the Isle of Mann and Ireland.

When? Training challenges over the next year, followed by the Falkland's circumnavigation in spring 2016.

Why? To raise awareness of post-traumatic stress disorder within the armed forces and veterans, and to raise funds for charities supporting those with PTSD.

Why should we read your blog? We will be charting the highs and lows of this epic challenge, along with photos from the training expeditions, challenges and from the coastline of the Falkland Islands. We will also be updating regularly with information on PTSD and how the money raised will be spent.

www.rockleshellendeavour.com



LONDON TO CAPE TOWN

Who? James and Emily.

What? Cycling 20,000km from London to Cape Town.

When? We left in July; the trip should take around 11 months.

Why? To raise £50,000 for World Bicycle Relief, and to take a break from work to really experience and enjoy life. We have been dreaming of an adventure like this for years.

Why should we read your blog? We'll be sharing the highs and lows from the road, and telling tales of the people we meet, the countries we see and the food we eat. We are taking our time to allow us to stop and experience life in each country we pass through and to have the opportunity to have some mini adventures along the way too: climbing active volcanoes in the Democratic Republic of Congo, trekking in the Simien Mountains, diving the Red Sea...

<http://london2capetown.org>

FOURTH LARGEST ISLAND: TRAVERSING MADAGASCAR



Madagascar man...



...Ash Dykes

Who? Ash Dykes, British Adventurer of the Year 2K15.

What? A world first, traversing the length of Madagascar, taking on all the major mountain summits and densest jungles along the way. It's an expedition of over 1,800 miles which will take more than four months to complete.

When? Starting this September.

Why? Firstly for the challenge, the adventure and to see what I'm capable of. I'll face temperatures between -20°C and 40°C, cross crocodile infested waters, tackle technical climbs and hack my way through the jungle, going over 10 days without seeing a soul. I'll also be partnering with the Lemur Conservation Network and raising awareness about Madagascar's unique biodiversity and the threats that lemurs and Madagascar's other unique animals face.

Why should we read your blog? Find out how my guide and I live off the land and work together to make our way across the world's fourth largest island. We'll also meet and learn the ways of coastal African tribes, then Asian highland tribes. Madagascar features in a lot of people's minds, but not many know what truly lies in its heart. I'll be sharing stories with live updates and video blogs throughout the expedition. It will be very real, dangerous and beautiful and it will feel like you are there with us.

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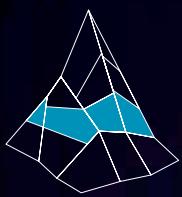


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